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PERRIS OF THE CHERRY-TREES

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WHAT THIS STORY IS ABOUT

The author has written a moving love story ; a story of gradual estrangement between man and wife, and the development of a new and happier love for the woman.

It was mere chance that Mark Taffendale, the wealthy farmer, came to Cherry-trees Farm and met Rhoda Perris, the wife of Abel Perris. And from that moment the flame of love grew. But venomous tongues and quick passions were to bring tragedy upon the scene, and this romantic tale of the countryside develops into a human drama of life which is darkened by murder but enlightened by love and self-sacrifice.

PERRIS OF THE CHERRY-TREES

BY

J. S. FLETCHER

Author of "Daniel Quayne," etc.

HERBERT JENKINS LIMITED
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Perris

Please see page 181

PERRIS OF THE CHERRY-TREES

I

PIPPANY WEBSTER, handy-man and only labourer to Abel Perris, the small farmer who dragged a bare living out of Cherry-trees, the little holding at the top of the hill above Martinsthorpe, came lazily up the road from the village one May afternoon, leading a horse which seemed as fully inclined to laziness as Pippany himself. Perris had left home for a day or two, and had apportioned his man a certain fixed task to accomplish by the time of his return : Pippany, had it so pleased him, might have laboured steadily at it until that event happened. And for the whole of the first day and half of the next he had kept himself to the work, but at noon on that second day it was borne in upon him that one of the two horses, which formed the entire stable of the establishment, required shoeing, and after eating his dinner, he had led it down the hill to the smithy near the cross-roads in Martinsthorpe. There, and in the kitchen of the Dancing Bear, close by, where there was ale and tobacco and gossip, he had contrived to spend the greater part of the afternoon. He would have stayed longer amidst such pleasant surroundings, but for the fact that supper-time was approaching.

It was difficult, looking at man and horse, to decide

as to which most suggested helplessness and incompetence. The horse showed itself to be a poor man's beast in every line and aspect of its ill-shaped, badly-fed body, in the listless droop of its head, in its ungroomed, rough-haired coat, in the very indecision with which it set down its oversized, sprawling feet. It had a dull, listless eye, the eye of an equine out-cast; there was an evident disposition in it to stop on any provocation, to crop the fresh green of the grass from the broad stretches of turf on the wayside, to nibble at the tender shoots of the hedgerows, to do anything that needed little effort. It breathed heavily as it breasted the hill, following the man who slouched in front, his head drooping from his bent shoulders, his lips, still moist and sticky from the ale he had drunk, sucking mechanically at a foul clay pipe. He was a little more fully attired than the scarecrows in the neighbouring fields, but there was all over him the aimlessness, the ineptitude, the purposelessness of the unfit. His old hat, shapeless and colourless, shaded a face which suggested nothing but dull stupidity, and was only relieved from utter vacancy by a certain slyness and craftiness of expression. He shambled in his walk, and his long arms, the finger-tips of which reached below his knees, wagged and waved in front of him as he forged ahead, as though they were set loose in their sockets, his small, pig-like eyes fixed on the few inches of high-road which lay immediately before his toes. From the foot of the hill to its crest those eyes were never lifted.

And yet, the crest of the hill once gained, a landscape presented itself over which most folk would have gazed with pleasure and appreciation. On all sides the country stretched away in a great plateau, thickly wooded, and just then smiling in the clear light and fresh, unsullied tints and colours of spring-

tide. The place to which the unkempt man was leading the unkempt horse was in itself a picture. It stood, a small but very old farmhouse, with a high sloping roof, dormer windows, and tall chimneys, in the angle made by the meeting of two roads ; before it lay a flower-garden, in one corner of which rose an ancient cedar-tree ; behind it stretched a wide-spreading orchard, filled, for the most part, with cherry-trees, just then in the full glory of pink and white blossom. Immediately in front of it, on the opposite side of the highway, rose a great grove of chestnut-trees ; they, too, were in bloom, and the wax-like clusters made little pyramids of light against the glossy green of the wide-spreading leaves. And over everything was the clear blue of the May sky, and in the hedgerows and the coppices were the first signs of the flowering of the hawthorn.

Pippany Webster saw nothing of all this. He shambled slowly round the corner of the high-road into the lane which led towards the woods, and made a boundary on that side to Perris's farmstead, into which he let himself by a ramshackle door that opened on a range of dilapidated buildings. These buildings stood between the old house and the cherry orchard ; the lane ran at the back of them ; a farm-fold lay in front of them, fenced off from the rear of the house by a low stone wall. Against this wall, on the fold side, was a stone trough ; above it a leaden spout projected through the wall ; on the other, the house side of the wall, was a pump, which communicated with the well below. The human animals in the house and the brute animals in the field both drank water from a spring thirty feet beneath them, into which the runnings of fold and byre and stable percolated in some indefinite degree about which neither ever speculated.

The range of buildings into which Pippany Webster dragged the newly-shod horse was characteristic of what is usually seen on a small holding when the holder is poor and more or less shiftless. Between it and the house stood a dilapidated Dutch barn, empty of aught but a mess and litter of straw on the earth flooring :—almost as empty was the range of buildings itself when entered and inspected. The lower part was stable, cow-house, piggery so far as one-half was concerned ; above these offices was a granary, and next it a chamber wherein wool might be stored ; the other half of the range, unfloored from earth to roof face, made a barn which was nearly as destitute of straw as its Dutch substitute outside. Two horses in the stable, three cows in the byre, a few pigs in the sty, constituted Perris's live stock ; but outside in the fold, and in the adjoining orchard, his wife kept a pretty good establishment of poultry—fowls, ducks, and geese—and at various times made a little money out of it. It was well that she had some such stand-by, for the evidences of prosperity at Cherry-trees were few. An observer, skilled in matters of farming, having taken due stock of the animals, the condition of the fold, the emptiness of barns and granary, the poor bits of dead stock, ploughs, harrows, and the like, which lay rusting and woe-begone of appearance in a lean-to shed, would have sniffed and turned up his nose with a remark as to the folly of trying to work even fifty acres without capital. ✓

Pippany Webster unceremoniously turned the horse into a stable as destitute of straw on the bouldered floor as it was empty of aught to eat in the broken mangers. The horse looked into the manger, and at the rack fixed in the wall above it, and turning its head gazed at Pippany. It knew as well as Pippany knew that it and its stable companion would presently

be cast forth for the night into the adjoining grass meadow, and that as the spring nights were still nipping cold it was only right and just that something more warming to the belly than buttercups and daisies should be served up before the casting forth took place. And Pippany recognised the look and wagged his head.

"Then ye mun wait till I can cut some o' yon owd clover," he said. "Theer's none so much left, and when it's done wi' ye'll hev' to depend on what ye can pick up—if so be as ye're alive. There's nowt much of owt left about this here place."

As if in proof of this assertion he lifted the lid of the old stable-chest in which the horse-corn was kept, and gazed meditatively at its contents. In the depths of the chest lay two or three bushels of meal: Pippany remembered that there was none left in the granary above the stable; he remembered, too, that he had only enough pig-meal left wherewith to feed the pigs that night. He scratched his head dubiously.

"This is a bonny come-up!" he soliloquised. "If t' maister doesn't come home to-morrow and bring soome brass wi' him these here animals 'll go fro' bad to worse—if such is possible! Howsomever, I mun cut some o' yon clover for t' hosses and t' cows."

From a nook behind the corn-chest Pippany brought forth a hay-cutting knife, and proceeded to put an edge on it with a whetstone which he took from a hole in the wall. And at last, armed with this and with a stable fork whereupon he meant to impale the chunk of dried clover which he intended to carve out of the old stack at the end of the orchard, he went forth into the fold and crossed over to the orchard gate.

In the orchard, amidst the pink and white of the cherry-trees, two women were hanging out the last results of a day's family washing. The lines to which

they suspended the various articles of clothing, drawn wet and heavy from the wicker basket which they had just set down on the grass, were fastened here and there to the trunks or branches of the trees, here and there to certain ancient posts which were shaky in their foundations, and looked as if a little extra weight on the lines would pull them down altogether. There was scarcely any movement of air in the orchard; the lighter garments stirred but feebly when they were safely pinned to the line, the heavy ones hung straight down, motionless and inert.

Of the two women thus employed when Pippany entered the orchard, one, the elder, Tibby Graddige, general odd-job woman to the parish, was a tall, spare, athletic female whose every action indicated energy and strength. When she moved, every muscle and sinew of her body seemed to be brought into play; hands moved in unison with feet, and elbows with knees. Just as active were the motions of her thin, straight lips and her coal-black eyes; the way in which her hair, equally black, was drawn in straight, severe fashion from her forehead and hidden behind an old cap fashioned from the remains of some shred of funeral crape indicated her views of life and of a day's work, which were to keep going at both until both were over. She passed now from basket to line and from line to basket as if everything of importance in the world depended upon the swiftness with which the wet linen was hung out to dry.

The other and younger woman, Rhoda Perris, wife of Pippany's absent master, was of a different order of femininity. She looked to be about two-and-twenty years of age; the print gown which she wore did little to hide a figure which sculptors would have had nothing to find fault with had it been suggested to them as a model for the statue of something between a Venus

and a Diana. Above the medium height, generous of bosom and hip, there was yet a curious suggestion of lissom slenderness about her which was heightened by the print gown. Her uncovered hair, catching the glint of the westering sun, revealed tints of gold and red and brown accordingly as her head was turned ; it fell away to her ears in natural undulations from a centre parting, and was carelessly bound up into a heavy coil at the nape of her neck. Beneath the low, square forehead which the ripples of this elusively-tinted hair shaded were a pair of large eyes, the colour of which was as elusive as the hair—at times they seemed to be violet, at times grey, at times green. Always there was in them a strange sleepy seductiveness and a curious steadiness of gaze when they fixed themselves upon the object of their possessor's thoughts. The nose was in the slightest degree *retroussé*, the mouth inclining to largeness but perfectly shaped, the chin firm and rounded. As for the woman's colour it was that of the healthy, full-blooded human animal whose surroundings from infancy have been those of the woods and fields, and into whom the spirit of free air and the strength of the earth has entered with all the stirring nourishment of mother's milk.

Rhoda Perris, idly hanging a garment on the clothes-line, looked round as Pippany shambled through the rickety gate. She took a clothes-peg from between her strong, white teeth, and smiled sideways at Tibby Graddige.

"Seems to me it takes a nice long time to put one shoe on a horse nowadays, Pippany Webster," she remarked. "You took that horse down to the cross-roads at one o'clock, and it's past five now."

"T' smith weren't theer when I landed," said Pippany sullenly. "He were away up to Mestur Spink's about summat or other. An' when he came

back theer wor another man afore me 'at had browt two hosses—leastways a hoss an' a mare. Ye can't shoe a beast i' five minutes. An' I worn't going down there to wait all that time for nowt."

"No, and I'll warrant you didn't!" remarked Tibby Graddige. "T' Dancing Bear mek's a good waiting-room for such-like as ye when ye go to t' smith's!"

"Ye ho'd yer wisht!" retorted Pippany. "Nobody's given ye onny right to order my goings and comings, Mistress Graddige. I know when a hoss wants its shoes seeing to as weel as onny man."

"We'll see what your master says when he comes home," said Rhoda. "You'd no need to take the horse to-day—it was naught but an excuse to go and drink."

"I care nowt for what t' maister says nor what nobody else says," retorted Pippany, lurching forward past the women. "If Mestur Perris has owt to say to me he can pay me mi wage and let me go. I'm stalled o' this job—there's nowt left about t' place, and t' animals 'll be starvin' afore to-morrow neet. I'm none a fooil, and I can see how things is goin' wi' Mestur Perris—so theer!"

Tibby Graddige shot a swift look out of her black eyes in Rhoda's direction.

"There's imperence for yer!" she said softly. "But he allus were a bad un wi' his tongue, were that there Pippany Webster—used to miscall his poor mother, as were bedridden, shameful. Eh, dear—when the cat's away the mice will play, as it says in the Good Book. If I were Mestur Perris I should show t' way to the back door to yon theer."

Pippany shambled on to the old clover-stack, which stood at the end of the orchard. There was little of it left: what little there was made a dusky tower

which rose some eighteen or twenty feet in air from a base of two square yards. It was already shored up on three sides with stack props ; on the fourth a ladder led to the particular elevation at which Pippany on the previous day had cut sufficient provender out of the tightly compressed mass to serve for the animals' supper. Round the base of this remnant many inroads had been made upon the clover by the depredations of the cattle which had been allowed to pull at it ; when Pippany, carrying his hay-knife and the stable fork, proceeded slowly to climb the ladder, the stack began to tremble and to sway ; it was obvious that it would have tottered over but for the support which it received from the poles. But Pippany gave no heed to these signs ; he steadily mounted to the top, plunged his fork into the side, and kneeling down proceeded to drive his knife into the edges of the portion which he desired to cut out.

To drive an imperfectly edged cutting-knife into the compressed mass of an old clover-stack which has been standing, as this stack had, for at least three years, and had accordingly become almost solid, requires no small expenditure of might and strength. At every downward thrust which Pippany gave to his knife the stack shook and tottered on its insecure base, and if he had not been muttering threats and anathemas against Tibby Graddige to himself, he might have heard an ominous cracking and crunching below him. Pippany, however, heard nothing but the harsh voice of his knife crunching through the clover. And suddenly one of the supporting poles, already rotten when it was put up, snapped off short, the reeling stack gave way, and flinging Pippany, knife still in hand, headlong from it, heeled over after him and enveloped him in the débris of its destruction.

The two women looked round from the clothes-lines with scared faces.

"God ha' mercy on us, missis!" exclaimed Tibby Graddige. "What's yon atomy done now? Oh, Lord, Lord, that owd stack's fallen on him! And us wi'out a man about the place!"

When they reached the scene of disaster there was no sign of Pippany. The fine dust caused by the fall of the stack was clearing away, but neither leg nor arm protruded from it.

"He's buried under it!" whispered Tibby Graddige. "Oh, Lord, whatever mun we do?"

Rhoda was already silently tearing at the clover, seizing great heaps of it in her powerful arms and casting it aside. The elder woman joined her, but ever and anon loudly lamented the absence of a man. And suddenly she looked up, listening.

"There's somebody a-horseback riding past the corner!" she said. "Eh, I mun call to him, whoever he is!"

She ran swiftly through the cherry-trees to the low hedge which separated the orchard from the lane, and craned her neck above the green branches. The next instant Rhoda heard her voice, shrill and insistent.

"Hi, mestur! Mestur Taffendale! Mestur Taffendale!"

The man thus hailed, who was slowly riding along the highway at the end of the lane, drew rein, and, turning in the saddle, looked in Tibby Graddige's direction. Seeing that she was frantically waving her bare arm to him, he turned his horse's head, and rode towards her.

"What is it, missis?" he said as he drew near. "Anything wrong?"

Tibby Graddige panted out her reply.

"Oh, Mestur Taffendale, sir, th' owd clover-stack's

tailen on Pippany Webster, and he's buried under it, and there's nobody about but me and the missis. Come over and help us wi' it, if you please, sir ! "

Taffendale's first thought was that if the clover-stack had buried Pippany Webster once and for all the Martinsthorpe community would have experienced no great loss. But without making audible reply to Tibby Graddige's supplication, he forced his horse through one of the many gaps which abounded in the hedge of Perris's orchard, dismounted, and tied the bridle to the lower branch of a cherry-tree.

" Where is he ? " he said, speaking in the tones of a man who is asked to do something in which he has no personal concern and about which he is utterly indifferent.

" This way, sir ; the missis and me's pulled some of it offen him already," replied Tibby Graddige. " But there's more on it than you'd think."

When they turned the corner of the hedgerow behind which the fallen clover-stack lay piled in a shapeless mass, Taffendale saw Rhoda Perris for the first time. He himself lived on his farmstead a mile and a half away across the plateau behind the woods ; he rarely visited the village or passed Cherry-trees, and though he had heard of Perris's wife as what the country-folk called a bit of a beauty, he had never seen her since she and her husband had come to the place two years before. Now, as she stood up, flushed and panting from her exertions, he gave her one swift glance and as swiftly looked away. He had not been prepared for what he had seen.

By that time Rhoda had torn away a good deal of the fallen clover, and had uncovered the handle of the stable fork. Taffendale threw off his coat and seized the fork, at the same time jerking his head at the two women.

"Stand aside!" he said half-roughly.

He went to work carefully and systematically, but with sureness and swiftness. Tibby Graddige volubly gave forth her fears for Pippany and her admiration for Mr. Taffendale's cleverness and strength; Rhoda, her hands planted on her hips, stood by, watching in silence.

"Here he is!" said Taffendale at last, throwing aside the fork and resorting to his hands. "And, by George, he looks like a goner!"

He turned the crumpled-up Pippany over on his back, swiftly untied his neckcloth, and moved his head. Pippany's throat gurgled, and his lips emitted a long breath.

"He's alive, but he's unconscious," said Taffendale quickly. "We'll carry him into the house. Here, Mrs. Graddige, get hold of his legs and I'll take his shoulders. Have you got any brandy?" he continued, turning and looking squarely at Rhoda.

"No, but there's some whisky," answered Rhoda.

"Whisky will do," said Taffendale. "Now then, Mrs. Graddige, come on. He's no weight."

Rhoda ran on before them to the house, and was ready with the whisky bottle when they arrived and laid Pippany on the settle in the house-place. Taffendale took the bottle from her, poured some of its contents into a saucer which he caught up from the table, and some into a teacup. He handed the saucer to Tibby Graddige.

"Here, rub that on his forehead," said he. "Have you got a spoon handy, Mrs. Perris?"

Rhoda gave him a teaspoon, and he slowly poured small quantities of the raw spirit between Pippany's lips. Pippany began to stir and to moan; in a few minutes and under the influence of the whisky he opened his eyes. He gazed vacantly around him.

"Where—what——?" he began. "Where——?"

"Hold your tongue!" said Taffendale. "You're all right. You've saved your neck this time. Here, drink this, and then let's see if you've broken any bones."

A generous dose of whisky-and-water enabled Pippany to move his four limbs and to convince his interested helpers that he had not broken his back. Taffendale smiled grimly, and turned to Rhoda.

"He's all right, Mrs. Perris," he said. "Let him rest a bit and then send him home."

And again he smiled, looking at her inquisitively behind the smile.

Rhoda, in her turn, looked at Taffendale. She, too, was seeing him for the first time. She had often heard of him as the rich farmer and lime-burner across at the Limepits, but she had never met him. Now she viewed him with curiosity. He was a tall, loosely-built man, evidently about thirty or thirty-two years of age, dark of hair, eye, and complexion; there was a curiously reserved, self-reliant air about him which unconsciously impressed her. Just as unconsciously the sense of his masculinity was forced upon her; she was sensible of it just as she was sensible of his good clothes, his polished boots and fine cloth New-market gaiters, his white stock with the gold horse-shoe pin carelessly thrust into its folds. And she compared him, scarcely knowing that she did so, with her husband, Abel Perris, and something in the comparison aroused a curious and subtle feeling in her.

"I'm much obliged to you, Mr. Taffendale," she said. "And so ought you to be, Pippany. You'd have been dead by now if Mr. Taffendale hadn't chanced to be riding by."

"I'm deeply obligated to Mestur Taffendale," mumbled Pippany, eyeing the whisky bottle. "I'm

allus obligated to them as does good to me. But I'm worth a good many dead 'uns yet, and if Mestur Taffendale theer ever wants a friend——"

Taffendale gave Rhoda another grim smile, and moved towards the door. He had bestowed a swift circular glance on his surroundings, and he was marvelling at their poverty. The house-place in which they stood was little superior in its furnishing to any day-labourer's cottage; through an open door he caught a glimpse of a parlour that looked cold and bare. It seemed to him a poor setting for a woman as good-looking as he had found Perris's wife to be.

"Well, good-day," he said. "You go home, Webster, and get to bed."

Rhoda made a motion of her hand towards the whisky bottle.

"Won't—won't you take anything, Mr. Taffendale?" she said diffidently.

"No, no, nothing, thank you," replied Taffendale hurriedly. "I'm pressed for time. Good-day, Mrs. Perris."

He walked quickly through the fold, observing things to right and left of him without turning his eyes in either direction. And he saw the evident poverty of the place, and mentally appraised its value, and when he had got his coat and mounted his horse, and was riding away, he shook his head to the accompaniment of another of his sardonic smiles.

"That looks to be in a poorish state!" he thought. "And it's rent-day next week. I wonder how Perris stands for that? It's a pity for that wife of his—a fine woman!"

Rhoda and Tibby Graddige went back to the orchard to finish hanging out the clothes. Both were in meditative mood, brought about by the event of the afternoon.

"So that's Mr. Taffendale, is it?" said Rhoda. "For all we've been here two years I never saw him before. Well off, isn't he, Tibby?"

Tibby Graddige jerked her head.

"Well off!" she exclaimed. "I'll warrant! What with his big farm, and his lime-kilns, I should think he were well off, yon! Why, his father, old Mestur Taffendale, left him thirty thousand pound. An' isn't it fair shameful?—he's never yet shown sign o' tekkin' a wife to share it wi' him!"

Rhoda made no answer. She was wondering what so wealthy a man had thought of the palpable poverty of Cherry-trees.

II

ABOUT the time that Mark Taffendale and Tibby Graddige carried Pippany Webster into the house-place, Abel Perris got out of a train at the little railway station, Somerleigh, which stood four miles away along the high-road to the north of Martins-thorpe. A tallish, bony man, somewhat uncertain at his knees and rounded of shoulder, with a sharp, thin face, a weak chin, and a bit of sandy whisker cropping out in front of each over-large ear, he looked almost pathetically desolate as he stood on the platform, mechanically feeling in one pocket after another in the effort to find his ticket. His attire gave no force to his naturally colourless personality. Having been on a visit to his relations he had worn his best clothes—garments rarely brought out of the chest which had been their place of repose for several years. The sleeves of the black coat were too short, and exposed the prominent, fleshless bones of

the wearer's wrists ; the legs of the grey trousers had been shortened by much creasing and bagging at the knees, and revealed the rough grey stockings which terminated in unpolished lace-up boots ; the waistcoat, loose and baggy, was crossed by a steel watch-chain, bought in youth, a great bargain, at some forgotten statute-hiring fair. A much frayed collar, dirty and crumpled by its two days' wearing, and at least a size too small for the neckband of the coarse shirt on which it had with difficulty been fastened, formed a striking contrast to the gaudy necktie of blue satin, which was wound about it and had worked itself out of place until its knot lay beneath the wearer's left ear. The necktie, like the watch-chain, was the result of a visit to some fair or other ; it expressed Perris almost as eloquently as the useless switch of ashplant which he carried aimlessly in his great raw hand—a switch that was of no use for anything in a pedestrian's hand but to snick off the heads of the flowers and weeds by the wayside.

Perris was the only person who left the train ; a solitary porter was the only person who emerged from the station buildings to greet and speed it. The train went on slowly, and Perris made for the exit at the end of the platform with equal leisureliness. He found and gave up his ticket, and went out on the high-road. Opposite the station stood a wayside inn, meagre and poor of aspect, but dignified with the title of Railway Hotel ; Perris, having moved a few yards in the homeward direction, paused and looked at its open door uncertainly. His feet began to shuffle towards it ; eventually he crossed the road with shambling gait and bent head.

" I may as well take an odd glass," he muttered. " There's nowt 'twixt here and our house, and it's a good four mile."

The parlour into which he turned on entering the inn was close and heavy with the smell of rank tobacco and stale beer. Sawdust, strewn about three days before, and now littered and foul with the accumulations brought in from the road outside, covered the floor; the rough tables of unpolished wood were marked with the rings made by the setting down upon them of overflowing pots and mugs; the walls, originally washed in some indefinite tint of yellow or drab, and now stained and discoloured by damp and neglect, were relieved from sheer bleakness by framed advertisements of ales and spirits, and here and there by a grocer's fly-blown almanack. One side of the room was filled up by a bar, covered over with zinc sheeting, out of which projected three beer-pulls standing up like ninepins; behind it, on shelves ranged against the walls, were displayed a few bottles of spirits, an ancient cigar-box or two, and some rows of cloudy glasses. The whole place was down at heel and disconsolate: Perris, however, noticed nothing of its shabbiness: his eyes were no more offended by the squalor and the untidiness than his nose was vexed by the unpleasant atmosphere. He sat down heavily at the table nearest to the bar, and tapped on its surface with his ash switch.

A man emerged lazily from an inner apartment—a gross-habited, bloated man, about whose thickly-jowled face coarse black hair grew in sparse tufts. The silence with which he advanced to the bar was due to the fact that although the afternoon was merging towards eventide, he still retained the slippers into which he had thrust his feet on rising; it needed no particular observation to see that so far he had performed no ablutions nor made his toilet. His trousers were kept in place by a single suspender; between them and his open waistcoat, almost destitute

of buttons and greasy from much spilling of fat meats, large rolls of coarse linen forced themselves and suggested that he considered an allowance of one shirt a week ample for his requirements. He wore neither collar nor necktie: his unbuttoned shirt revealed a thick bull neck, and beneath it a chest covered as with the pelt of an animal.

"Day," said Perris, nodding mechanically. "I'll take a drop of Irish, if you please."

He reached up to the counter and laid a sixpenny-piece on it, and the landlord turned to a bottle behind him and poured some of its muddy-looking contents into a glass.

"Happen you'll take a drop o' summat yourself, like?" suggested Perris generously.

"Well, I'll just take a twopennorth o' gin," replied the landlord, helping himself from another bottle. "Here's my best respects."

"Best respects," murmured Perris. He picked up the penny which the landlord pushed across the counter, and dropped it into his pocket. "Quietish about here, isn't it?" he said.

The landlord leaned across the counter and stroked his sparse beard.

"Aye, there's naught much doing," he said. "This place is over far out o' the village, and them as comes by train doesn't turn in here very oft. It's naught to me—I was only put in to manage it, like: it's a tied house. Which way might you be going?"

"Nay, I come fro' Martinsthorpe yonder," answered Perris, nodding his head towards the south. "Least-ways, fro' Cherry-trees Farm—I been farming there this last two year. I don't oft come this way—it isn't in my direction for anywhere."

"How's things out your way, like?" asked the landlord.

"Middlin', middlin'," answered Perris, tapping his switch on the floor. "There's naught much to be made at it. It's naught but scrattin' a livin' out o' t' land."

"Why, it's summat to do that," observed the landlord. "There's some as can't scrat that much. And there's some as can. I'll lay yon neighbour o' yours at Martinsthorpe Limepits scrats more nor a livin'."

"Mestur Taffendale?" said Perris, looking up. "Ah, yes, but he were one o' them 'at's born wi' silver spoons i' their mouths, accordin' to what I understand. Yes, I understand that he's part brass, has Mestur Taffendale."

The landlord held out his hand for Perris's glass and replenished it and his own.

"Aye, he has so!" he observed. "And them that has aught, always gets more to put to it. I'll lay Taffendale could buy up all t' farmers i' Martinsthorpe."

Perris sipped his whisky and laughed feebly and foolishly.

"I'll lay he could buy me up!" he said. "It's our rent-day next week, and I'm sure a body's hard put to it to raise t' rent nowadays. There'll have to be some reductions or abatements, or summat, or else us little farmers 'll be sore tried."

The landlord made no reply to these remarks. He glanced the caller up and down, and drew his own conclusions. And Perris presently drank off his whisky, and rising to his feet looked indefinitely about him.

"Well, I must be off," he said. "It's four mile to my place. I think I'll take a sup o' whisky in a bottle, like, as there's no callin' place on t' way."

"Shillingsworth?" asked the landlord.

"Aye, shillingsworth or eighteenpennorth, it makes no difference," replied Perris, fumbling in his pocket and producing a florin. "Here, there's two shilling—make it eighteenpennorth, and we'll have another glass out o' t' change. And there's another penny, and I'll have a twopenny smoke."

With a rank cigar between his teeth, and a small bottle of bad whisky in the tail of his coat, Perris set out homeward along the highway. He had pushed his last coin across the zinc-covered counter, and his purse and pockets were now empty, yet he laughed as he shambled on beneath the wayside trees and the high hedgerows, carelessly swishing at weed or flower with his ashplant. But when he had gone a mile he paused, and leaning over a gate he drew out and took a long pull at his bottle and shook his head.

"I mun tell Rhoda how things is," he muttered. "She's a sharp un, is Rhoda; she'll happen be able to make out a bit. She might be for sellin' t' cows, and very like she's gotten a bit put away out o' them cocks and hens—women contrives to save a shillin' or two here and there where us men can't. Aye, I mun hev' a word or two wi' Rhoda."

Rhoda was alone when Perris came slowly in at the side gate and shambled along the cobble-paved path which lay between the fold and the house. He had drunk all his whisky and had thrown away the bottle, but the stump of his twopenny cigar still remained between his teeth, and he smiled weakly around it as he turned the door.

"I've comed, ye see, my lass," he said, dropping into the nearest chair. "Aye, and I didn't aim at gettin' back till to-morrow, but there were naught no more to do over yonder, so I thought I might as well be steppin', like. I could do wi' a bit o' supper, Rhoda, my lass."

Rhoda, who had got rid of Pippany, and having just seen Tibby Graddige depart, was trying to reduce the untidy house-place to something like order, turned from the hearth, looking at her husband with anything but a friendly glance. She instinctively compared his careless and forlorn appearance, his weak and fatuous face, with the vastly different impression which Mark Taffendale had left upon her, and she was suddenly conscious of an intense dislike, a fierce loathing of something which was not exactly Abel Perris, but with which he was somehow inextricably mixed up. Her glance lighted on the bright blue satin necktie, and she felt an almost insane impulse to snatch it from Perris's long, thin neck and stamp on it.

"How do you expect me to have any supper ready, or likely to be ready, when I didn't know you were coming?" she exclaimed. "You should come home when you say you're coming—there isn't so much as even a bone in the larder—yon there Pippany finished up what there was for his supper."

Perris, who was making vain attempts to relight the sucked and soddened stump of his cigar, looked up to where the shrunk shank of what had been a ham dangled from the rafters. There was little flesh left on it, but from the adjacent hooks hung a respectable piece of a flitch of bacon.

"Ye could fry a bit o' that bacon, my lass," he suggested. "And happen a egg or two wi' it."

"I can't spare any eggs," said Rhoda. "I want all the eggs I have for market. And if you must have some tea, you'd better go and fill that kettle. I wish you'd stopped away till to-morrow."

Perris took the kettle out to the pump, filled it, came back and placed it on the fire, and having reseated himself again tried to induce the cigar to burn.

"I didn't see no use i' stoppin' away when I'd done mi business," he remarked suddenly. "When business is done, it is done, and so there's an end on 't."

"And I hope you did whatever it was you set off to do," said Rhoda, who, mounted on a chair, was cutting slices off the flitch of bacon and tossing them into the frying-pan which she had placed on top of the oven. "And if it's aught to do with money I hope you've brought some home, for if ever there was a place where it was wanted, this is it! There was Mr. Taffendale here this afternoon, and I'm sure I was fair ashamed that he should see such a starved looking hole!"

Perris looked up with a faint gleam in his pale grey eyes.

"What might Mestur Taffendale be wantin' on my premises?" he asked.

"Your premises? Lord, you talk as if the place was a castle or a hall!" exclaimed Rhoda. "What did he want? Why, yon fool of a Pippany Webster pulled that old clover stack over on himself, and Mr. Taffendale happened to be passing, and helped Tibby Graddige to carry him in here—he'd have been suffocated if it hadn't been for Mr. Taffendale."

Perris slowly rose, and going to the door craned his long neck in the direction of the orchard.

"Ah, I see t' clover stack's down," he said, coming back. "Did he bre'k any bones, Pippany?"

"No, he didn't break any bones, nor his neck neither," replied Rhoda. "A good job if he had—idle good-for-naught! He'd been down at the Dancing Bear all the afternoon. It's worse nor a puzzle to me that you keep such a shiftless gawpy about the place. Why don't you go and clean yourself?" she suddenly burst out, turning upon him from the fire,

where she was endeavouring to accommodate both kettle and frying-pan. "You look as if you'd never been washed since you went out of that door. And for goodness' sake take that necktie off—you look like one of those country joskins that's used to naught decent."

"Mi Aunt Maria, over yonder, thought it were a very fine tie," said Perris, unconsciously fingering the adornment. "She remarked that it were, as soon as ever she set eyes on it."

"Then your Aunt Maria's a fool!" remarked Rhoda. "Go and wash yourself, do!"

Perris went into a scullery beyond the house-place; when he returned, the dirty, crumpled collar and the blue necktie had disappeared, and his face shone with brown soap, and his neutral-tinted, damp hair was smoothly plastered over his forehead. He hung up his coat on a peg that projected from the end of the tall dresser, and sat down in his shirt-sleeves. Rhoda had cleared a place for him at the deal table, and had set out a cup and saucer, a plate, and bread on the bare board. While the bacon frizzled in the pan she folded the damp clothes which lay piled about, sorting them into heaps against the morrow's ironing.

"And what did you go away for?" she asked suddenly, glaring at Perris, who sat awaiting his supper, with his hands folded under his baggy waistcoat.

"I weern't talk no business till I've had mi supper," he answered. "I've had neither bite nor sup since I left yon place, and I'm none goin' to talk business on an empty belly."

Rhoda gave him another swift glance.

"You mayn't have bitten, but you'll none make me believe you haven't supped," she retorted. "You were stinking of spirits when you came in."

"That's neither here nor there," said Perris. "I might have taken an odd glass or two on t' way—all travellers does that. But I want summat to eat, and I'll none talk till I've had it."

Rhoda gave no further attention to him. When the bacon was cooked she set it before him, made him a pot of tea, and went on with her work. In the silence that ensued she was increasingly conscious of a growing dislike to her husband's presence; it seemed to her that the mere fact of his being there was setting up in her some sort of nausea which she could not explain. And once more she thought of Mark Taffendale, of his good clothes, his fine linen, his suggestion of power and prosperity and money, and a certain uneasiness grew and stirred to increasing activity within her.

Perris ate up every scrap of the food which his wife had set before him, and finished his supper by cleaning the grease off his plate with a piece of bread, which he then swallowed with evident satisfaction. He turned his chair to the fire with a grunt of animal contentment, and proceeded to light his pipe. Rhoda whisked away the earthenware he had used into the scullery, and washed it up; having come back to the house-placeshe silently went on with her work amongst the clothes. For a time Perris sat and smoked, silent as she was, but at last, after some preliminary scraping of his feet and clearing of his throat, he addressed her.

"There's a matter that I think we'd best have a bit o' talk about, Rhoda, my lass," he said diffidently. "It's gotten to be talked about some time or other, and we may as well table it and have done wi' it."

"Well?" she said.

"Ye're aware, my lass, ye're aware that the rent-day's close at hand," continued Perris. "Early next week it is."

"Well?" she said again.

"Aye, well, the fact is, my lass, that I'm not ready for it," he said. "I've nowt i' hand!"

Rhoda put down the garment which she was just then folding and looked round at her husband.

"You don't mean to say that you can't pay your rent?" she demanded in sharp tones.

"I've nowt i' hand," Perris repeated stolidly. "Nowt! Times has been that there bad that I haven't been able to make no provision. It made a deal o' difference to me losing that young horse last back-end, and ye know as well as I do, my lass, that I made nowt out o' what bit o' stuff I had to sell all winter. No, I've nowt i' hand for no rent-days."

Rhoda was still standing idle, still gazing at him as if she scarcely comprehended what he was telling her.

"What did you go away for?" she asked suddenly. Perris shook his head.

"I went to see if so be as I could raise t' rent money among mi relations," he answered. "I went to see mi brother John William, and mi Uncle George. I considered that they were t' likeliest people to make application to, ye see, my lass. Howsomever, they could do nowt, for times is as bad wi' them as what they are wi' me. Mi Uncle George has had sad losses, and our John William's suffered a deal o' sickness in his family, and now his wife's been thowtless enough to go an' have twin bairns on t' top on it. No!—they couldn't do nowt to help, howsoever willin' they might ha' been. An' so, of course, that's where I'm sittiwated, Rhoda."

Rhoda had neglected the contents of the clothes baskets ever since Perris began to talk. She was leaning over the table at which he had eaten his supper, her knuckles resting on the ledge, her body bent

slightly forward as if she wanted to meet every word that came from him. Her eyes, hard, cold, questioning, never left his face.

"Where's the five hundred pound you said you had when we got married two year ago?" she demanded suddenly.

Perris looked up quickly, and as quickly looked away again. He shuffled his feet uneasily on the stone floor.

"Why, why, my lass!" he answered deprecatingly. "Five hundred pounds is none so much to start housekeepin' and farmin' on. There were furniture to buy and stock to buy, and there's been rent to pay, and——"

"Then it's all gone?" she said. "There's naught in the bank?"

"Aw, there's naught in t' bank," he admitted. "At least, nowt much—not beyond a pound or two. Ye see, I've made nowt o' this farm. What I've scratted out on it's just about kept us, my lass."

"Fine keeping!" she exclaimed scornfully. She turned to the clothes-basket again, and began to sort out the garments with nervous, spasmodic movements. "And what's to come if you don't pay that rent next week?" she demanded again, pausing in her work. "What's going to happen, I say?"

Perris shook his head.

"Nay!" he replied. "I don't know, my lass. T' steward's none over friendly inclined, as it is. Last time he were round this way he threw out some hints about me not having over and above much amount o' stock. Happen he'll sell us up. There's about enough on t' place to pay t' rent, anyway."

"And we should go out on the road—beggars!" said Rhoda.

Perris rubbed the end of his chin and stared about him.

"It's a poor game, bein' a little farmer," he observed. "I never had enough capital, as they call it. If I had a hundred pound now I could pull things round. But as mi Uncle George and our John William says——"

"I want to hear naught about your Uncle George nor your John William neither!" said Rhoda. "What's going to be done! You sit there, and do naught but talk."

"Happen I could persuade t' steward to wait a piece," suggested Perris. "He's given other men time to pay. I can happen talk him round."

"And happen you can't! He knows as well as you do that there's naught about the place," said Rhoda. "Where he does give time to pay, it's where a man has something to show. You've naught to show."

Perris hung his head and blinked at the fire.

"I can sell t' beasts and t' pigs," he said. "That 'ud make summat towards t' rent."

"And leave the place barer than what it is! You'll not do aught of the sort. What's wanted," Rhoda continued, "isn't taking stuff off this place, but putting stuff on."

"I could soon put some stuff on if I'd brass to do it with," said Perris. "But I've never had no luck. I expect ye haven't a bit o' money put aside out o' them cocks and hens, my lass?"

Rhoda darted a look at him which made him shrink instinctively into his chair. She vouchsafed no answer to his question, but went on mechanically folding and wrapping. Suddenly she turned on Perris and snapped out a command.

"Off you get to bed!" she said. "If all's as bad

as you say it is, you'll have to stir yourself to-morrow, so you may as well get your rest. It's past nine o'clock now."

Perris obeyed this order at once. He slipped off his boots and lumbered heavily up the chamber stairs. Hours after he had gone his wife worked at her task, her face clouded and her eyes sombre with thought. It was near midnight when she turned out the lamp, wrapped herself up, fully dressed, in an old rug, and lying down on the settle, fell instantly fast asleep.

III

RHODA wasted no words on her husband next morning until he had finished his breakfast, which meal he took in company with Pippany Webster, sitting at the same table, and making no distinction or difference between his man and himself. But that over, she drove Pippany out of the house-place with a look and a word, and turned on Perris, who, if she had not been between himself and the door, would have slipped away and escaped her for the rest of the morning.

"Now, then, what're you going to do?" she demanded.

Perris looked at her furtively.

"Why, there's a bit o' fencin' wants attendin' to away i' yon five-acre," he answered. "I were thinking that you could happen give as a bit o' dinner to carry along wi' us, and then we'd make a full day's job on it."

"You'll get your dinner here, and at the proper time," said Rhoda. "And you answer my question. I say—what're you going to do?"

"Do about what, then?" Perris asked sullenly.

"This rent. You're got to do something," she said. "I'm not going to be turned out like a beggar, if you are!"

"There's nowt that I can do," replied Perris, scratching his head. "Leastways, not to-day. I might sell them beasts and pigs to-morrow when I go to market, but——"

"You'll sell neither beasts nor yet pigs," declared Rhoda. "You're the sort that 'ud sell fifty pounds of stuff for twenty. You don't take a thing off this place!"

Perris muttered, and scratched his head again.

"Have it yer own way!" he said. "Have it yer own way, my lass!"

"I wish I had had it my own way!" she retorted. "We shouldn't have been in this mess. Just you listen to me, Abel Perris! As like as not, the steward 'll be turning up here on Monday morning, first thing, just as he did last year. What's this place look like for him to peep and spy about in? Now then, you and that there Pippany set to work and put things to rights, and if you want your dinners at noon, and your suppers at six o'clock, mind you've something to show for 'em! I know what wants doing, and I know how much two of you can do, and if you haven't done what you ought to have done by twelve o'clock there'll be no dinner on this table. So now you know."

Perris shambled out, muttering comments on his own folly in telling his affairs to a woman.

"You can grumble and chunter as much as you like," Rhoda called after him, "but there 'll be

neither bite nor sup, when dinner-time comes, if all them buildings aren't straight and this fold tidied up. There 'll be plenty for you to do to earn your supper after that."

Perris murmured, but made instant preparation for obedience. He knew that Rhoda would be as good as her word; he also knew that she was right in what she said. The steward had a nasty habit of descending upon the smaller tenants when he came on his half-yearly visits, and when he did make such a descent he poked his long nose into every corner of farmstead and field. Perris felt himself to be an object of suspicion already, and he knew that the steward would have no mercy upon him if he found things going to rack and ruin. He summoned Pippany from a lazy contemplation of the pigs, and entered unwillingly upon a day of hard work. By noon the buildings had been tidied up and made presentable; Rhoda came out from her ironing and looked them over; her approval was manifested in the fact that she gave each man a pint of ale with his dinner of boiled bacon. Experience had taught her to preserve the key of the barrel in her own possession, and Perris had known all the morning that there would be no beer unless her commands were obeyed. Similar conclusions made him and Pippany toil hard all the afternoon. By supper-time a great change had come over the place: Perris, indulging a certain foolish optimism which was ingrained in him, felt it to be a pity that the steward could not drive up at that moment.

Rhoda, having accomplished a long day's ironing, gave master and man their suppers and disappeared upstairs. When she came down again she was wearing her Sunday finery, and Perris, stretching his legs before the fire, stared at her.

"Aw, where 're ye goin', mi lass?" he inquired.

"Going?—I'm going to chapel, of course," answered Rhoda. "Isn't it the monthly week-night service?"

"Nay, I didn't know," said Perris. "Well, I weern't offer to accompany yer, my lass—I'll just bide at home and smoke mi pipe. I'm over tired to go chappillin' when I've done mi day's labour but of course them 'at's religious is different."

Rhoda made no reply. She opened the top drawer of the old bureau which stood in one corner of the house-place and took out a hymn-book and a handkerchief. From a gaily-decorated bottle she sprinkled a few drops of cheap scent on the handkerchief; carrying it and the hymn-book in her left hand, and taking her ivory-handled umbrella in her right, she went off without further word to her husband. The key of the beer-barrel was in her pocket; the last drop of whisky had been wasted in restoring Pippany Webster to consciousness; she had made herself assured that Perris had no money on him, and therefore could not visit the Dancing Bear. Accordingly, he could come to little harm during her absence at the religious exercises which she made a point of never missing.

In addition to her charm of face and figure, Perris's young wife possessed a fine voice, of the quality of which she was by no means unconscious. If she had been less gifted she would have attended the parish church, but the church possessed a surpliced choir of men and boys, and had no need for a particularly strong soprano; and, moreover, anything beyond the most modest congregational singing was not much desired by its authorities. This sent Rhoda, who had no idea of allowing her talents to go unused, to the Methodists. These good people, a little time before

the coming of Perris and his wife to Cherry-trees, had bought a second-hand American organ for their chapel, and had consequently turned their attention to something better in the way of music than they had previously attempted. They welcomed Rhoda with great enthusiasm, and immediately installed her as leader of the choir. It would have been difficult, indeed, to make her anything else, for her voice was strong and clear, and she led and controlled the hymn-singing in more senses than one. On summer evenings, when the doors of the chapel stood open, her powerful notes were heard far across the meadows outside, and the non-religious part of the surrounding population lounged over garden gates, or sat on the edge of the causeway, to listen with surprise and pleasure.

Whatever might be going on at home, Rhoda never missed any of the chapel services or the weekly choir-practices. She had come to be sovereign mistress of the young men, maidens, and children who sat with her in the singing-pew beneath the pulpit, and though the ministers and preachers chose the hymns, it was Rhoda who settled upon the particular tunes to which they should be sung. Consequently she was something of a power, and had already begun to consider the chapel in the same light in which an opera-house is viewed by a prima-donna who sings in it season after season. The heads of the little congregation deferred to her in everything relating to the musical part of the services ; the young man who walked out from the market-town to play the American organ, and who cultivated his hair after the fashion of a plaster cast of Beethoven which he had purchased from an itinerant vendor of busts, worshipped her, and presented her every Sunday afternoon with a paper of strong mint lozenges, to be consumed during the

sermon. These attendances at the chapel were therefore Rhoda's sole diversion in an otherwise grey and colourless life ; she would not have missed one of them for any reason whatever, and she was always in her place winter and summer, fair weather or foul.

But on this particular evening Rhoda had an additional reason for going down to the chapel. On one night of the month one of the regular ministers came to preach ; the minister for that night was an old man who had a reputation for prudence and sagacity ; she wanted to ask his counsel and advice on the difficulty in which Perris by his incompetence had placed his wife and himself. All through the service she was scheming and planning as to what might be done ; of the sermon she heard nothing ; she sang the hymns mechanically. And when the service was over and the congregation had departed she curtly dismissed the organist, who usually walked with her as far as the Dancing Bear on their homeward way, and following the old minister into the little vestry, she asked for an interview with him. With a plainness and directness which made him regard her as an eminently business-like and practical young woman, she put the situation before him.

"You see, Mr. Marriner," she concluded, "it's this way. Abel, he's not a bad farmer, but he's weak and shiftless, and if things begin going wrong he loses heart and then he goes from bad to worse. I'm sorry to say I've little good opinion of him as a manager for himself. But I know what I can do. If I'd a bit of money I'd manage that place myself, and I'd make him work. I'd manage it, and I'd manage him—I've managed him to-day to some purpose, I'll warrant you, Mr. Marriner ! I'm none going to stand by and see everything go to naught but failure if I can help it. But the thing is—where am I to find

the money ? My poor father's a big family of his own, and it's all he can do to keep it—he can't do aught for me. What would you advise, now, Mr. Marriner ? ”

The old minister, who had a sufficient knowledge of Abel Perris to make him aware that in this case the grey mare was much the better horse, considered matters for a few minutes.

“ Well, Mrs. Perris,” he said at last. “ I dare say there are plenty of people who would lend you money in preference to lending it to your husband. Now, supposing you could get money and pull things round, do you think you could manage him ? ”

Rhoda drew her fine eyebrows together, and screwed up her eyes, and Mr. Marriner gained a new impression of her. He laughed softly, nodding his head.

“ I see—I see ! ” he said. “ Well, now, aren't there any of your neighbours that would help ? I understand that some of the big farmers hereabouts are pretty well to do—some of them very well to do. Can't you think of one of them ? ”

A sudden hot flush burned into Rhoda's cheeks. She was quick to make excuse for it.

“ I don't like the idea of going cap in hand, as they say, to neighbours, Mr. Marriner,” she said. “ I've never been used to asking favours, though I came of poor folks. And I don't know any of the big farmers hereabouts ; they look upon us little farmers as so much dirt beneath their feet ! I've never spoken to one of them—except to Mr. Taffendale.”

“ Why, Mr. Taffendale's the very man ! ” said the old minister. “ I know him to be a wealthy man. He's on a committee of which I'm a member, so I meet him now and then. I'll tell you what I'll do, Mrs. Perris, if you like. I'll write him a note, saying that you've told me your troubles, and that I'm

sure he won't be disappointed if he helps you. How would that be?"

"Thanking you kindly, Mr. Marriner, it would be a good help," Rhoda answered. "I should feel less what you might call ashamed and frightened about it if I had some writing of yours to show."

"All right, all right!" said the old man. "I'll write it now. I think you'll find Mr. Taffendale a likely man to apply to. Tell him all you've told me; let him see you mean business. He'll see then, I'm sure, that you know what you're talking about."

"Oh, I know what I'm talking about, Mr. Marriner!" said Rhoda, with quiet confidence. "I don't talk for talking's sake. And I know what I can do if I set out to do it."

Ten minutes later, when the old minister had mounted his horse and ridden away, Rhoda, holding the note which he had given her, stood in the darkness outside the chapel, thinking. Once she turned in the homeward direction, only to pause before she had taken many steps. And after the pause she suddenly turned in the other direction and began to walk rapidly down the village street, already deserted and quiet.

"Since it's got to be done, I'll do it now," she muttered to herself. "I'll do it, and get it over."

Martinsthorpe was a long, straggling village lying in a valley which ran from east to west. It was divided into two halves by a high-road running north and south, and transecting the one street at the point where the Dancing Bear looked down from his swinging sign upon the cross-roads formed by the intersection. In the western half of the village stood the church, the school, the principal farmsteads, and the great house of the place; in the eastern there was nothing more pretentious in the way of human habitation than the smithy, the carpenter's shop, a general store kept by

an old woman, various clusters of labourers' cottages, and the little chapel. Beyond lay open and uninhabited country which stretched, wood, meadow and arable land, for many a mile before the next village showed itself through its ring of ash and elm. But just beyond the chapel a footpath ran across the valley and up the hillside in the direction of the Limepits, Taffendale's place on the uplands, and this Rhoda took, and followed with swift steps. Having made up her mind on the question which—in spite of her silence upon it during her conversation with the old minister—had been agitating it all day, she was resolved on a plan of action, and she went with firmness and resolution to its first beginnings.

The great stretch of flat land on which the Limepits Farm stood like some giant ship in the midst of an otherwise lonely sea, was silent almost to oppression as Rhoda passed across it in the dusky night. Long before she reached it she saw the gaunt farmstead outlined against the stars. Something in its vast solidity, its bulky mass of house and outhouse, barn and granary gave her a curious sense of power, wealth, security—it seemed to typify Taffendale and his money. And as she drew nearer the sense deepened, for opposite the farm lay the famous limepits, from which the bulk of that money was drawn, and from the burning pits a dull glow of fiery red was rising to the night. She stood for a moment between the two sources of wealth which were in this one man's control, and she felt the glow of the burning pits play over her face, and caught the pungent odour of the lime in her nostrils. Then, with a quick catching of her breath she turned boldly to the farmhouse and knocked firmly at its door.

IV

TAFFENDALE, always a man of action, and supremely interested in his numerous affairs, had been out and about during the whole of a long day. From an early hour of the morning until close upon noon he had been busied with the demands made upon him by his farm and his lime quarry; after dinner he had galloped into the market-town to attend the weekly auction sale, and had subsequently gone to a special meeting of the Board of Guardians; on his return home he had had his correspondence to deal with; his early supper over, he had given two hours to his account books. And when Rhoda's knock sounded at his door, he had just put on his slippers, lighted his pipe, mixed himself a glass of whisky-and-water, and was about to spend a quiet hour over the newspaper before going to bed. That last hour at night, he was accustomed to say, was the only one he ever really got to himself.

The sound of the firm, decisive knock, reverberating through the stone-walled passages of the big house, caused Taffendale to take his pipe out of his mouth and to look vaguely around him. His farmstead was so isolated in the midst of the lonely land, so far away from any other habitation and from the nearest high-road, that it was a rare thing for any person to come there at any time except by invitation or on business; that any one should call there at such a late hour of the night was something quite out of the common. He sat for a moment wondering if he had heard aright; then he remembered that his housekeeper and servants always went to bed at nine o'clock, and that there was no one to answer

this unusual summons. With the unwillingness of a man who dislikes disturbance all the more because its cause is unknown to him, Taffendale slowly raised himself out of his chair and went down the hall to open the front door. In the light of the swinging lamp he recognised Rhoda Perris. The rustic porch in which she stood made a sort of setting and frame around her ; behind her the red glow of the burning lime-kilns, across the garden and the road, conspired with the deep blue of the night to form a background to her figure and to the warm tint of her hair. Taffendale felt himself start at the unexpected sight of her.

" Mrs.—Mrs. Perris ? " he said questioningly.

" Good evening, Mr. Taffendale," she replied in tones which were curiously suggestive of timidity and yet of assurance. " You'll excuse me for calling at a time like this, but can I have a word with you ? "

Taffendale stood aside and motioned her to enter.

" Come in—come in ! " he said. " Yes—yes ; certainly, Mrs. Perris."

Closing the door, he led the way back to his sitting-room, wondering greatly what had brought Perris's wife there. No reason for her visit suggested itself to him ; he was still speculating about it in a vague, indefinite fashion when he led her into the room and pushed forward the easy-chair from which he had just risen. And as Rhoda took it he plunged his hands deep into the pockets of the riding-breeches in which he had been going about all day, and had been too busy to take off before his supper, according to his usual practice, and stood looking down at her with the doubtful expression of a puzzled man. As he looked, the consciousness of the woman's attractive and compelling femininity forced itself upon him ; he felt, rather than saw, the healthy glow

of her cheeks, reddened by the rush of the wind across the uplands over which she had walked, and the clearness of her grey eyes and the warmth of her hair, and something stirred within himself and troubled him. He withdrew one hand from a pocket and rubbed his chin as if in perplexity.

"It's—it's rather cold to-night," he said suddenly. "It—it turns cold of a night. Will you take anything, Mrs. Perris?"

He glanced at the spirit-case which stood on the table, and he made a move towards it with the zest of a man who finds relief from embarrassment in action.

Rhoda raised her head and shook it.

"Oh, no, thanking you kindly, Mr. Taffendale," she hastened to say. "I never touch spirits."

"A glass of wine, then," said Taffendale. "Come—a glass of port won't do you any harm. And if you're afraid of drinking it without eating, there's a cake somewhere. My housekeeper's gone to bed, but I know there's always a plum-cake at hand."

He had turned to a sideboard as he spoke, and had begun fumbling about in one of its recesses. Rhoda made no answer to this second invitation except to murmur something inarticulate which might be taken as acquiescent; she sat in front of the blazing fire, instinctively appreciative of its warmth and cheeriness. And Taffendale's back being now turned, she glanced round about her with swift comprehension of the details of her host's surroundings. She was quick to notice the comfort and even luxury upon which she had entered out of the night; her woman's eyes realised the significance of the fine old furniture, the thick carpet, the silver and glass on the sideboard, the family portraits on the walls, the books and papers, the little evidences of the possession of money in plenty. And as swiftly as she took all this in,

she visualised with equal swiftness her recollection of her own house-place at Cherry-trees—poverty-stricken, cheerless, and Abel Perris, unkempt, toil-stained, sitting, hands crossed on stomach, and heavy with sleep, before a dying fire in a badly-polished grate.

"Aye, here it is," said Taffendale, turning to the table and setting upon it a plum-cake which stood in a silver basket. "My housekeeper prides herself on her cakes, Mrs. Perris. Now you'll take a glass of port—it'll do you no harm after your walk."

Rhoda let him help her without further demur on her part; it was a long time since anybody had offered her hospitality, or waited upon her. She crumbled a piece of the cake and sipped at the red wine, and Taffendale, feeling less embarrassed, drank off his whisky and mixed himself another glass. He was still wondering why the woman had come to see him, but no explanation of her presence suggested itself to him.

"How's that man of yours?" he asked suddenly. "Any the worse?"

Rhoda shook her head.

"No, he's no worse, Mr. Taffendale, thank you," she answered. "He's done his work to-day."

Taffendale laughed gently.

"I should think Pippany Webster's day's work isn't worth much," he said. "He was always a shammocking sort." Rhoda nodded.

"He isn't worth what little he gets," she answered. "But——"

She paused suddenly and looked up from the plate on her knee to gaze with resolute steadiness at her host, who had taken a chair on the other side of the hearth, and had re-lighted the pipe which he had laid down on her entrance.

"Mr. Taffendale," she said, "you're wondering what I came for?"

Taffendale, surprised by the directness of her look and tone, nodded.

"Just so," he answered, with equal directness, "I am."

Rhoda put the tip of a finger on a crumb and began to move it round and round the rim of the plate.

"I always believe in saying things straight out," she said, after a brief pause. "The truth is, Mr. Taffendale, I've come to see if you'll lend me some money."

Taffendale's brows knitted, but Rhoda was quick to see that the alteration arose not from resentment but from surprise.

"Oh!" he said. "Why, what is it? What's it all about? Of course, I couldn't think why you'd called."

"No," she said. "Of course, you couldn't, Mr. Taffendale. Well, you see, it's this, to put it shortly. Perris, he hasn't the money for the rent."

Taffendale smiled quietly.

"Did he send you?" he asked.

"No," she answered quickly. "No, he didn't, Mr. Taffendale. Perris doesn't know that I'm here. I'm not asking you to help him—I'm asking you to help me. I wouldn't ask anybody to help Perris. He's—he's—well, he's not fit to be trusted with money."

Taffendale frowned, and began to rub his chin with the back of his hand—a habit of his when he was puzzled.

"Make it clear, Mrs. Perris," he said. "Take your time, but make it clear."

Rhoda put her plate on the table and faced her host.

"Well, it's like this, Mr. Taffendale," she said. "I'll make it as clear as I can. You see, when we came there to Cherry-trees, two years ago, Perris and me had just been married, and he said he'd five hundred pounds, and he could do well on that bit of farm, and of course I believed him. But it didn't take so long to see that he wasn't doing well—I knew that plain enough, because I come of farming folk. All the same, I never knew that he was doing as badly as it turns out he was. I thought he'd some—a good deal—of that five hundred pounds left in the bank. Then the other day he went off, saying that he'd business with some of his relations, and last night, after you'd gone away, he came home, and he out with the truth. He'd been to try to borrow money for the rent, and he couldn't borrow it, and he's naught but a pound or two in the bank. That's where it is, Mr. Taffendale."

"Aye," said Taffendale. "Aye—I see. And the rent-day's early next week."

"And the rent-day's early next week," repeated Rhoda. "And what's more, Mr. Taffendale, the steward'll have no mercy on Perris. You saw what there was about the place."

Taffendale laughed softly and nodded.

"I saw," he said. "Um! And if I did lend you the money for the rent, Mrs. Perris, you'd be no better off than before. You'd——"

Rhoda interrupted him with a quick turn of her head.

"Wait a bit, Mr. Taffendale," she exclaimed. "I said I'd ask you to lend the money to me, not to Perris. I've considered matters. I've been considering all day long. I've talked matters over with Mr. Marriner, the minister. It was Mr. Marriner advised me to come to you. He wrote me this letter to give

to you. Perhaps you'll read it, Mr. Taffendale."

Taffendale took the note which Rhoda held out to him, and read its contents carelessly.

"Yes," he said, laying the note on the table, "I know Mr. Marriner, of course. But supposing I lend you this money, Mrs. Perris, what are you going to do afterwards?—after the rent-day, I mean?"

Rhoda involuntarily straightened her figure, and Taffendale, covertly watching her, gained an impression of strength and purpose.

"Do?" she exclaimed. "Do? I know what I'd do, Mr. Taffendale. I'd keep a tight hand on Perris. I said—I've been considering matters all day, and I've explained my notions to Mr. Marriner. That Cherry-trees farm can be made to pay, and I can make it pay—if only I'm master! If I'd had the management of the money it would have been paying now, and there'd have been no need to ask help from anybody. Once let me get that rent paid, and perhaps have a bit of money to go on with, and then I shall have Perris under my thumb, and there I'll keep him. Oh, he's a good farmer, and a good worker, is Perris, so long as he's made to work, and I can make him. I made him work like a nigger to-day, I can assure you, Mr. Taffendale."

Taffendale laughed delightedly. His neighbour's wife was beginning to amuse, as well as interest, him.

"How?" he asked.

"I told him if there wasn't so much work done by dinner-time there'd be no dinner," answered Rhoda, with a flash of her grey eyes and her white teeth; "and if there wasn't so much more done by supper-time there'd be no supper. He worked right enough, did Perris, after that, for he knew I meant what I said. But that's Perris all over. He wants a master."

Let me get the chance, and I'll master him : I'll keep him at it till he's made that farm pay, or I'll know why. He's weak, is Perris, and he's let things slide, and I was that silly that I didn't see how it was all going. But I see now, and I see how I can right 'em. It's never too late to mend, Mr. Taffendale."

Taffendale laughed again. He had risen from his chair, and, hands plunged in his breeches pockets, was standing at an angle of the fire-place, looking down at his visitor with the amused eyes of a man to whom something new and entertaining is presented. And suddenly he blurted out the thought that was in his mind.

"However came a woman like you to marry a man like Perris?" he exclaimed. "How was it?"

Rhoda looked quickly up and met his inquiring gaze with eyes of childlike candour.

"Well, you see, Mr. Taffendale, it was like this," she answered. "My poor father, he had the foolishness to have a very big family—there's eleven of us, all alive, and I was the eldest of the lot. And he's naught but a little farmer, and, as you know, Mr. Taffendale, little farmers is sore put to it to make ends meet, and to scratch a living, at the best of times; and, of course, when there's a family as big as that you can guess what it's like—shameful, I call it, for folk to have such families! However, that's neither here nor there—eleven of us there was, and eight of us girls, which made it all the worse; and, of course, it was about all we could do to scrape along. And then when I grew up it came to it that the older ones had to go out to work. And what can such-like as we do, Mr. Taffendale? We never had any education, except such as there was at the village school, so there was naught for it but going to service. Well, I was in service at the Squire's for three or four years, and I

didn't like it because I wanted to be my own mistress—I've a good deal of pride about me, Mr. Taffendale. And then when I was nineteen, Perris yonder came along, and he said he'd taken this Cherry-trees farm at Martinsthorpe here, and he'd five hundred pounds in the bank, and he wanted a wife, and—and so, well, I married him, Mr. Taffendale. That's how it was."

Taffendale, who had watched Rhoda closely while she gave him this history of her career, nodded his head.

"Aye, I see, I see," he said. "You've never had any children?"

Rhoda, who had kept her eyes fixed on his while she talked, turned them swiftly away, and he saw a curious flicker play for an instant around the corner of her lips.

"No," she answered quietly. "We've had no children, Mr. Taffendale."

Taffendale took his hands out of his pockets and his pipe out of his mouth, and moved across the room to an old bureau which stood, filled with books and papers, in one corner. He sat down, turning the papers over.

"Let's see, Mrs. Perris," he said. "How many acres is that Cherry-tree farm?"

"It's sixty-seven acres, Mr. Taffendale," answered Rhoda.

"And what's the rent?" he asked. "I used to know, but I've forgotten."

"It's twenty-six shillings an acre, Mr. Taffendale," she replied.

Taffendale made a rapid calculation.

"Eighty-seven pounds, two shillings a year," he said presently. "And there's how much rent owing, Mrs. Perris?"

"Only half a year's, Mr. Taffendale," she answered. "This last half-year. All's clear up to then. And, what's more, I made sure to-day that there's naught else owing."

Taffendale turned his back upon her, and for the next minute or two occupied himself in writing. When he turned round again, he rose and handed her a slip of pink paper.

"There's a hundred," he said carelessly. "Now, mind, Mrs. Perris, I'm lending that to you, not to Perris. You'll observe I've made the cheque out to 'cash'—you cash it yourself to-morrow when you go to market. Give Perris the exact amount that is needed when he goes to pay his rent at the Dancing Bear next week, and take care of the rest yourself. And you run that place as you've told me you would, and you'll make it pay."

Rhoda stood up, trembling. Her cheeks flushed and her eyes shone, and Taffendale suddenly grasped the fact that she was a very handsome woman. Affecting unconcern, he picked up his glass and nodded to her.

"Here's good luck to you!" he said laughingly. "You seem a good hand at business, Mrs. Perris."

Rhoda's flushed cheeks deepened in colour.

"I don't know what to say to thank you, Mr. Taffendale," she said in a low voice. "It's hard to find the right words, and——"

"Then don't bother to find them," Taffendale broke in. "I'm glad to help you. There's one thing—if I were you, I should tell your husband who's helped you. And then, perhaps, you could just have that bit of talk with him—eh?—about pulling things round."

Rhoda's eyes flashed back her recognition of his meaning.

"Oh, I'll tell him!" she answered. "I'll tell

him, Mr. Taffendale! And—I'll talk to him. You'll see I'll straighten things up down there. And now I'll go—and thank you, again."

"You aren't afraid of going home alone?" he asked, looking at her narrowly.

"I'm afraid of nothing," she said quietly. "I've walked lonelier roads than this, and later at night."

Taffendale walked down to the garden gate with her, and lingered there for some time listening to her retreating footsteps. When at last he went back to the parlour he looked at the chair in which his visitor had sat, and for a moment he seemed to see her still sitting there, and the parlour was warm and alive with the remembrance of her womanhood.

V

PERRIS, hearing next morning just as much as Rhoda chose that he should hear, was conscious of only two feelings—the first, of relief at the knowledge that the half-year's rent was going to be paid; the second, of unbounded admiration at his wife's cleverness in raising a loan. He began to laugh foolishly.

"Gow, but that were a rare clever notion on your part, Rhoda, my lass!" he exclaimed, slapping his bony knees. "Ecod, I should never ha' conceived that there notion as long as I lived! I mun express my obligations to Mestur Taffendale when I meet him at t' rent dinner, and, of course, we mun aim to repay him his loan as soon as we can. I expect he'd hand yer t' amount in a cheque—what?—so I can get t' cash for it when I go t' market to-day. I'll get myself cleaned up, and be off afore noon."

"You're going to no markets to-day," said Rhoda.

"I'm going ; and I can do all that wants doing : I know what's wanted as well as you do. What you'll do, is to stop at home, and go on with getting this place put to rights against the steward coming round. There's enough for you and that there Pippany Webster to do even if you work your hardest all day long. You'll get that fencing put right in the orchard, and there's two big gaps wants seeing to in the garth, and when all that's done you can spend the rest of your time in the front garden. You'll find your dinners on the oven top, and two pints of ale in a bottle ; and if you've done all you should have done by the time I get home there'll be something extra for your supper, and maybe a drop of whisky before you go to bed. So you get to work, and don't stand idling there any longer !"

Perris, whose lean face had grown longer and longer during this address, shook his head wonderingly, and began to comprehend that in some fashion his wife had got the whip hand of him.

"Well, I never heard tell of a chap not going to market on a market-day," he said. "It seems summat right out o' t' common, does that there ! No, I never heard tell——"

"Well, you've heard tell now, then," exclaimed Rhoda. "And what do you want to go to market for ? You've naught to sell, and what bit of horse corn and pig meal there is to buy I can order as well as you, and better. You get to your work, and mind what I say, else there'll be no supper, and no drop of whisky after it."

"Why, my, lass, why !" said Perris. "I expect ye mun have your own way. But what about Mestur Taffendale's cheque ?—'cause I expect it is a cheque—ye'll have to——"

"Never you mind about Mr. Taffendale's cheque, nor aught else," answered Rhoda commandingly. "It's

enough for you to know that there'll be the rent ready for you to take down to the Dancing Bear on Tuesday morning. Off you go to your work—and mind you look after that good-for-naught Pippany Webster!"

Perris, chiefly appealed to by the thought of the promised supper and the drop of whisky thereafter, shambled to the door.

"Well, it's summat to know that t'rent's provided for," he said, as he went out. "Ye mun have t' exact amount, my lass, in notes and——"

Rhoda shut the door in her husband's face, and went up to her chamber to make herself ready for her walk to the market-town. She had little doubt as to the effect of her warning to Perris, and when she came back late in the afternoon she found that her orders had been faithfully carried out, and that more than she had stipulated for had been done. And Perris had his reward in his supper, and in one stiff glass of grog before he went to bed, and he told Rhoda that he always knew she was clever. He endeavoured to turn such conversation as there was between them to the subject of Taffendale's loan, but Rhoda repulsed him whenever he did so. She made him go twice to chapel next day, and on the Monday morning she had him up and at work at a bright and early hour. And in the forenoon, without any warning, the steward descended upon Cherry-trees, and looked carefully about him, and at the end of an hour went away obviously surprised and gratified with what he saw. He took off his hat to Rhoda when he left, and Rhoda gave him a cool nod. The steward, who, from information received, had fully expected that Perris would not be able to pay his rent that half-year, smiled as he drove off in his smart dog-cart.

"Perris 'll turn up with his money all right to-morrow," he said to himself. "And I'll lay a pound

to a penny-piece that his wife's got it hidden away in some corner at this very minute ! ”

The half-yearly rent audit was held at the Dancing Bear, and the day was one of the most important in the village calendar. At half-past nine in the morning the steward drove over from the market-town with his clerk, and took up his quarters in a room which for that occasion only was converted into an office. At ten precisely the door of this room was opened, and the cottagers filed in to pay their rents of ninepence, a shilling, or fifteen-pence a week. As each discharged his or her due, he or she received a present of two shillings in lieu of a dinner, and each was sent out to the kitchen to take modest refreshment in the shape of bread-and-cheese and ale. By eleven o'clock these humble folk were cleared off ; they were good and ready payers all, and it was very rarely that any of them were short of their rent or had to ask for grace. Then came the turn of the blacksmith, the carpenter, the shopkeepers, and the small farmers ; when they were disposed of, the big farmers, solid and important men, entered and handed over their cheques. By noon the audit was over, and the steward, his clerk, and the farmers, big and little, and the tradesfolk sat down to meat in the club-room. The steward tarried long enough to eat this ceremonial dinner, to propose the usual loyal toasts and the health of the lord of the manor, and to make a little speech on agriculture in general and the state of the village in particular : these duties performed, he and his clerk departed with their money-bags, and the company either dispersed or gave itself up to conviviality for the remainder of the afternoon.

If Rhoda could have had her own way she would have gone down to the Dancing Bear and paid the rent herself. But she knew that that was neither

possible nor proper ; such a proceeding would only have aroused comment, and her policy was to pursue her new course quietly. All that she could do was to warn and exhort Perris, and to send him on his errand decently equipped. She had pressed and brushed his best suit, and had bought him a new necktie ; she saw to it that he was scrupulously clean and neat when he set out, and to put a finishing-touch to his appearance she took his ashplant switch away from him and gave him her own ivory-handled umbrella to carry, being herself utterly unconscious that it suited him about as incongruously as a pink parasol would suit an elephant. But the attiring and bedecking of him was the least part of Rhoda's troubles. Since their coming to Cherry-trees Perris had attended three rent dinners, and he had come home from each in a state of foolish intoxication. Rhoda had her own reasons for wishing him to keep sober on this particular occasion, and she meant to use such methods of prevention as she could. She knew that Perris had no money on him, and so, when he was all ready for departure, and dangling the ivory-handled umbrella in his big red hand in a fashion which showed how seriously it incommoded him, she counted out the exact amount of the rent on the parlour table, and made no offer to supplement it with a modest sum for himself.

"There you are," she said, again enumerating the notes, gold and silver, "forty-three pounds, eleven shillings. And you take good care you don't touch a penny of it, after you button it up in that pocket, until you hand it over to the steward, and mind you get your proper receipt. And now, then, get off, and come straight home as soon as the dinner's over."

Perris slowly put the money in a much-worn leather purse, which he carefully buttoned up in his breeches pocket. He looked at his wife doubtfully.

"I shall want a bit o' brass for misen, like, my lass," he said, with almost pathetic reproach. "I spent up when I went to see mi Uncle George and our John William. I've nowt left. I mun have summat i' mi pocket, Rhoda."

"What do you want aught in your pocket for?" demanded Rhoda. "You've naught to spend it on. Isn't there a good dinner provided for you, and as much to drink as ever you like, and cigars and all? There's no call to spend a penny!"

"Aye, but ye see, mi lass, a chap feels strange, like, if he's nowt in his pocket," said Perris. "I know 'at all's provided, but then there's allus a bit o' waitin' time before t' dinner, and ye can't sit i' company wi'out takin' an odd glass, and happen treatin' a neighbour. I should feel ashamed to go into company wi'out owt i' mi pocket."

"Well, you'll get naught here," said Rhoda. "You ought to feel thankful that I've borrowed that rent money. You couldn't borrow it!"

Perris gazed at his wife furtively, and his dull eyes narrowed and a faint spot of red came into each lank cheek.

"Ye weern't gi' me nowt to go wi'?" he said.

"No!" she answered. "I won't!"

Perris flung down the ivory-handled umbrella.

"Then I'm none goin'!" he said. "T' steward can come and fetch his brass. I weern't go into company wi'out a penny in mi' pockets."

Rhoda glanced at the clock. It was already time that Perris was off. From some recess of her gown she hastily drew forth some loose silver and flung it on the floor.

"There, then!" she said sulkily. "But you mind this—come home as you did last time, and you'll see

what you'll get, Abel Perris. You'll find no supper to-night if you don't behave yourself."

Perris grinned as he stooped and picked up the coins.

"If I eat as much as I mean to at yon dinner, I shan't care whether there's owt for t' supper, or whether there isn't, mi lass!" he said. "I know how to fill mi belly when it costs nowt to do it."

And, triumphant in his knowledge of possession of money, he once more resumed his grip on the umbrella and went off, heedless of Rhoda's shrill reminder that even if he did not want supper that night, he would be sure to want his dinner next day. For Perris the coming day had no terrors; he had his rent in his pocket, and the prospect of a banquet of gross food and a sufficiency of drink before him, and he laughed fatuously as he descended the hill to the village.

The Dancing Bear was as busy as a hive of bees. The cottager folk were eating and drinking in the kitchens; the small farmers and the tradesmen were in one parlour; the big farmers in another; outside the inn numerous idlers and hangers-on lounged against the walls, or stood about the cross-roads, hoping that something in the way of good cheer might come their way. Perris walked into the sanded hall and met the carpenter emerging from the temporary office. He nodded his head at the door.

"Anybody wi' him?" he asked carelessly.

"Nay—I think you're t' last o' us little 'uns," answered the carpenter. "Ye'll hev' a bit o' good news in theer, Mestur Perris—I hear there's a rebate for such as ye. We don't get it."

Perris pricked his ears. He knocked boldly at the door of the room in which the steward sat, and, having entered, marched up to the receipt of custom as confidently as if he had a large balance lying at his

bankers'. A moment later he laid down the borrowed money as proudly as if it had been his own. The clerk began to make out the receipt, and the steward glanced at Perris through his gold-rimmed spectacles.

"You'll be glad to hear that there is a rebate to come to you, Mr. Perris," said the steward. "In consideration of last year's wet harvest, his Lordship has very generously made a reduction of ten per cent. on the rental. So we must give you back——"

"Four pound, seven, three-halfpence," broke in the clerk, who had a mind above niceties in fractions. "There you are, Mr. Perris, and there's your receipt. I think Mr. Perris is the last of that lot, sir," he added, turning to his principal.

Perris picked up the money and the receipt with ill-concealed pleasure. He grinned widely at the steward.

"Why, I'm sure I'm deeply obliged to his Lordship," he said. "Deeply obliged, sir. Yes, sir, it were a very bad time, last harvest, and it didn't improve nowt at t' back end o' t' year, and——"

"Doing all right, Mr. Perris?" asked the steward, cutting him short.

"Why, you were pleased to say we looked very well, yesterday, sir," replied Perris, still grinning. "Of course——"

"I thought you looked very tidy, and I'm glad to see you're attending well to your fences," said the steward, "but I also think you want more stock on your farm."

Perris's face grew solemn, and he looked at the ceiling. Then he looked at the steward with a mysterious air, and bent to him across the ledgers and the papers.

"Pigs, sir!" he said in a hoarse whisper. "Pigs

is what pays, sir ! I'm a-goin' to do summat big in pigs."

"Oh, I see !" said the steward. "Pigs, eh ? All right. You're stopping to the dinner, of course."

Perris intimated that such was his intention, and made his bow. He went out of the room chuckling to himself as he jingled the money which the clerk had handed him. And as he lingered for a moment in the hall, previous to joining his fellow small farmers and the carpenter and blacksmith in the room set apart for them, Mark Taffendale rode up to the door of the Dancing Bear on his smart cob, and, dismounting, threw the bridle to a lad who stood near.

Taffendale was both an owner of land and a tenant of land. The lime quarry, and much of the land which he farmed, was his own freehold property, and so was his farmstead. But on the Martinthorpe side of the Limepits he rented some two hundred acres of the estate whose steward was now collecting the rents, and he made a point of always attending the audit, to pay his rent in person, and to share the rent dinner with his neighbours of the village. He had seen Perris at these dinners, but he had never spoken to him, for Rhoda had been right when she said the big farmers regarded the little ones as so much dirt beneath their feet ; and now, as he came into the Dancing Bear, he merely gave the tenant of the Cherry-trees a careless, cold nod. But Perris was in his path, and Taffendale had to stop, for the man pulled off his hat and made a servile obeisance.

"Good-mornin', Mestur Taffendale," said Perris. He favoured Taffendale with one of his weak smiles, and looked around him with his air of mystery. "I—I were hopin' to speak to you, sir. I'm deeply obliged to you, Mestur Taffendale, for your kindness, and——"

Taffendale made to brush past him.

"All right, all right!" he said brusquely. "No need to say anything, Perris: that's enough. Look to your farm—you can do well on it if you are careful."

He passed on and entered the steward's room, and closed the door behind him, and so shut out Perris, who was vainly trying to say more. And Perris, again grinning, and again jingling the unexpected money, made for the little parlour wherein his own set awaited him. There was still a full hour before the serving of dinner, and naught to do but to make merry in it: Perris drew silver out of his pocket as he joined the company. He bestowed one of his fatuous grins on the other small farmers.

"I think we mun as well spend a bit o' that rebate money—what?" he said. "Ecod, I weren't expectin' owt o' that sort this mornin'! Now what's it to be, gentlemen, while t' big nob's is payin' up and t' dinner's gettin' ready, like? Speyk the word!"

Four hours later Perris shambled away up the hill from the Dancing Bear. He, the blacksmith, the carpenter and the little farmers had kept conviviality up when all else were gone. The steward and his clerk, Taffendale and the better-to-do men, had left as soon as the dinner was over; the men who could least afford to spend money had lingered to waste what they had. And Perris, once clear of the inn and the cross-roads, became conscious of his misbehaviour, and a great fear fell on him.

"I misdoubt I've ta'en overmuch o' yon sherry wine," he muttered to himself. "I'm over and above market-merry. I moan't face t' missis like this here—she'll gi' me bell-tinker if I do! I mun lie down a bit somewhere, and sleep t' drink off—that's what I mun contrive."

He remembered a quiet spot behind a wheatstack

in a corner of one of his own fields, and with a view to reaching it unobserved he climbed the hedge a little further on and made towards it. But in climbing the hedge he slipped and broke off the handle of the highly prized umbrella, and further visions of Rhoda's wrath arose before him. Moaning and whimpering over his bad luck, he made his way beneath the shelter of the hawthorns to the quietude of the wheat-stack ; and there, clutching the fragments of the umbrella to him, he cried himself into unconsciousness.

VI

WHEN Perris lay down to sleep behind the wheat-stack he was unaware that Pippany Webster was watching him from the vantage-point of a convenient hole in the adjacent hedge. The man-of-all-work had been spending a leisurely day in hoeing turnips, and, secure in the knowledge that his master was at the Dancing Bear, and likely to remain there, he had varied his peregrinations up and down the rows of fresh green plants by long rests in the welcome shade of the hawthorns. It was during one of these vacations that he saw Perris lurching across the next field. Pippany saw at once that the farmer was drunk, and, drawing back into the hedgerow, he followed his crab-like movements with interest. He watched Perris gain the wheatstack and disappear behind it ; seeing that he made no reappearance, Pippany decided to approach with caution, and to ascertain for himself what had happened. The wheatstack stood in the angle of the field ; it was an easy matter to creep along the hedge and to see what was going on in the angle which Perris had sought as a refuge from

Rhoda. In a few moments the man was gazing at the master, who by that time was oblivious of everything.

"Drucken!" Pippany muttered, as he peered through the undergrowth of the hedge. "Reight drucken! He's come theer to sleep t' drink off. I wonder what our missis 'ud say if shoo set ees on him?—shoo'd be for takin' t' skin offen his back. It 'ud be a rare fine thing if I went and telled her 'at he wor liggin' theer!—I could like to see her beltin' him."

Pippany was so taken with the notion of beholding Rhoda thrash her drunken husband that he was minded to set off in the direction of the farmstead there and then, and to fetch her to the scene of Perris's slumbers. But just as he was about to turn away his small eyes caught sight of a shining object which lay on the ground at the unconscious man's side. The shaft of sunlight which streamed down between the wheatstack and the hedgerow fell full upon it, and Pippany noticed that it was glinting upon a golden sovereign.

Visions of great possibilities stole across Pippany's mental field at the sight of that piece of gold. He rose from his hands and knees, trembling in every limb, and looked fearfully and cautiously about him. There was not a soul in sight anywhere; the ground on which the wheatstack stood lay in something of a dip in the land, and it was impossible to see it from the farmstead. Close by there was a convenient gap in the hedge; Pippany presently crept through it, and cautiously approached the recumbent figure. A slight inspection convinced him that Perris was not to be aroused by anything short of violence, and he picked up the sovereign and bestowed it in his own pocket. Then it struck him that where the

sovereign had been other sovereigns might be, and he presently summoned up courage to insert his hand into his master's pocket and to draw forth what he found there. And, stealing quietly round to the other side of the wheatstack, Pippany counted his gains. There were three sovereigns and a half sovereign, and some small silver; the silver Pippany put in his breeches, the gold he placed in his metal tobacco-box, snugly stuffed in amongst the tobacco.

"I mud just as weel hev' it as let him hev' it," he said to himself. "He's niver paid me fair, and this here 'll do to mak' up. Gow, but Mistress Perris, shoo would be mad an' all if shoo knew I'd takken his brass away thro' him!"

This reflection so cheered Pippany that he crept back through the gap in the hedge, picked up his hoe, and worked steadily at the turnips until it was time to discontinue his labours for the day. At a quarter to six he shouldered his hoe and made off to the farmstead. His supper was due to be served at a quarter past six, but he was indifferent as to whether it was ready or not; he was already promising himself a supper of his own, later on, when he returned to his cottage in the village.

Rhoda was in a temper when Pippany walked into the house-place. She had expected Perris to return home by four o'clock at the latest, he would even then have had quite two hours for his conviviality and recreation. When five o'clock arrived and there were no signs of him she began to exhibit symptoms of anger, and her temper was not improved by the remarks of Tibby Graddige, who had come to assist at the weekly wash, and was full of suggestions as to what happened when a parcel of men got talking and drinking after the rent dinner. And just before Pippany's arrival she had sent Tibby down to the

Dancing Bear with a message to the effect that Mr. Perris was urgently wanted at home.

"Have you seen aught of your master?" she demanded, as Pippany lurched into the house-place and made for the seat whereat he took his meals. "Has he been with you since dinner-time?"

"I hev'n't seen nowt o' no maisters," answered Pippany, seating himself. "I hev'n't set ees on Mestur Perris sin' braikfast, when he telled me to start on them tonnups. An' a rare hard day I've hed on it, an' all—t' sun wor that hot this efternoon 'at ye could ha' fried that theer bacon by it!"

Rhoda made no reply. She had no cause of complaint against Pippany, and she set his supper and his pint of ale before him. As he began to eat and drink Tibby Graddige came back, black-browed and mysterious. She gave Rhoda a swift glance as she entered.

"Now then?" said Rhoda.

"They say 'at Mestur Perris left t' Dancin' Bear at just after four o'clock," said Tibby. "Mistress Pycock, t' landlady, she says she see'd him walkin' as straight and sober as a judge up t' road—he shakked hands wi' her afore he quitted t' premises."

"Then where's he gone?" said Rhoda. "It doesn't take more than a quarter of an hour to walk up from the cross roads."

Pippany Webster looked up, his cheeks bulging with bread and bacon.

"It's i' my mind, missis," he said, "it's i' my mind 'at our maister said summat this mornin' about goin' over to Lowcroft yonder some time to-day to see about some young pigs 'at Mestur Turbey hes to sell. Happen he's gone theer when he come away thro' t' rent dinner?—killed two birds wi' one stone,

I' that case he'd go across t' fields at t' back of the village. I know he wor wantin' some o' Mestur Turbey's young pigs—they're reight 'uns, is them young pigs—what they call Berkshires. I lay that's wheer he's gone."

Rhoda considered this suggestion in silence. She and Tibby Graddige sat down to a cup of tea at the little table near the fire. Tibby, who had taken a drop of something comforting at the invitation of Mrs. Pycock, began to tell the news.

"They've hed grand doin's to-day down at t' Bear," she said. "Mistress Pycock, she tell'd me what they hed to eat. Theer were a noble sirloin o' beef—t' biggest, she said, 'at they iver put on t' spit i' their kitchen—and a boiled leg o' mutton, wi' t' usual trimmin's, and a boiled ham—a grand 'un!—and roast fowls and boiled fowls, and plum-puddin's, and berry-pies and custards. I'll lay some on 'em weern't want their bellies fillin' for another week. And theer wor wine to sup, an' all—port wine and sherry wine, same as t' quality sups when they get their dinners. And Mistress Pycock, she says 'at they all did full justice to it, and t' steward complimented her varry high afore all t' company. And of course all t' farmers hed good reasons to be i' reight fettle for their meat, an' to rejoice an' all, 'cause theer were a reduction o' t' rents."

"A what?" exclaimed Rhoda.

"A reduction o' t' rents, as they call it," answered Tibby. "A rebate, like—givin' 'em all back summat out o' what they paid, 'cause his Lordship had pity on 'em on account o' t' wet harvest last year."

"How much?" demanded Rhoda.

"Why, Mistress Pycock, she said it wor what they term ten per cent.," replied Tibby, "an' I'm sure I don't know what that means, 'cause I'm no scholard ;

but she said, did Mistress Pycock, 'at it meant 'at wheer a farmer paid, as it weer, say fifty pound, t' steward handed five on it back to him. An' a varry nice surprise an' all, and I don't wonder 'at they hed a good heart for atein' their dinners. I could ate as much as iver were set afore me if I hed a few golden pounds i' my pocket 'at I hedn't expected to find theer ! "

" Aye, an' so could I ! " said Pippany Webster. " Theer's nowt gives a man such a appetite as knowin' 'at he's gotten a bit o' brass on him ! "

Rhoda had sufficient mathematical knowledge to be able to make a rough mental calculation. If a man who paid fifty pounds in rent had five pounds returned to him, a man who paid over forty must receive at least four. So that, in addition to the small silver change which she had flung on the hearthrug at his feet that morning, Perris before noon must have been put in possession of over four pounds in gold. Where was he ? What had he done with it ? What was he doing with it ? She knew his weakness ; if he had gone to look at Turbey's pigs, it was quite probable that he and Turbey had adjourned to a certain roadside inn at the other end of Martinsthorpe, and that they would sit there drinking until the landlord turned them out. And for the hundredth time that day she wished that she had done what she had wanted to do—made an excuse for Perris's non-attendance and gone down to pay the rent herself.

Pippany Webster finished his supper and went off, turning his tobacco-box over and over in his breeches pocket ; Tibby Graddige remained long enough to wash up the crockery, and then she went, too, and Rhoda was left alone. By that time she was furiously angry, and her anger increased because of her powerlessness to deal with the situation. Had she known

as a certainty that Perris was at the Dancing Bear, she would have gone down there and raked him out of parlour or kitchen without shame or ceremony. But by that time she did not know where he might be. He might be at Turbey's—Turbey was fond of the bottle himself—or he might be at the wayside inn beyond Lowcroft ; he might even have gone into the market-town. There was nothing for it but to wait, and in the gathering dusk she waited, chafing and resentful.

The dusk changed to darkness, but Rhoda had no thought of lighting the lamp. The wood fire died down until it was no more than a handful of smouldering ash ; she let it sink unregarded. Nine o'clock had come and gone when she heard an uncertain step on the cobble-stones of the farmyard. She sprang up then, and lighted a tallow candle which stood on the table ; as its feeble light slowly spread over the cheerless scene the door opened, and Perris came in, to meet his wife's accusing and angry eyes.

Perris was sober by that time—sober enough, at any rate, to be in a state of dire dejection, repentance and fright. He had awakened with a violent start, to find himself on his back behind the wheatstack, with a starlit patch of sky over his head, the hedgerow swaying in the night wind, and his clothes damp with the rapidly gathering dew. He had there and then set off home, having some vague notion in his muddled head that there was a bad time before him, and that he had better get it over. But he was unconscious of the loss of his money ; the only catastrophe of which he was aware was that of the ivory-handled umbrella. And when he walked into his house, he grinned at Rhoda with the ingratiating and benevolent smile of one who brings good tidings.

“ Now, my lass ! ” he said, with a fine attempt to

carry matters off in a good style. "I'm a bit late, as it were—I hed a bit o' business that okkeypied me when t' rent dinner were over. Ye'll be glad to hear, mi lass, 'at his Lordship thowt well to make a reduction on t' rents, and so accordin'-ly—accordin'-ly, I say——"

Rhoda suddenly uttered an exclamation of horror. She had caught sight of the broken umbrella, and she darted forward and snatched it out of Perris's grasp.

"Aw—aye—I hed an accident wi' t' umbrella," said Perris apologetically. "It's ower weak for a grown man to walk wi'. We mun hev' it mended, mi lass, or we mun buy a new 'un. Howsomiver, as I were observin', mi lass, his Lordship were so disposed——"

Rhoda suddenly slapped her open palm on the table.

"Where's the money?" she demanded. "Where's the money?"

Perris began to fumble in his pockets. His wife's sharp eyes detected the bits of straw and grass on his clothes; he looked as a young colt looks that has been rolling itself in field and fold; she saw, too, that his billycock hat was crushed in, and that he had torn a considerable rent in the tail of his coat. And as she watched him she saw his face, drawn and dirty from his out-of-doors sleep, turn pasty with wonder and fear. His hands shook as they strayed from pocket to pocket.

"It's—it's none there!" he stammered. "I—I mun ha' been robbed! Robbed!"

Rhoda's bosom heaved up in a great throb of passionate rebellion. Her face, too, turned white around her blazing eyes and drawn lips as she shook her fist at the amazed man who stood swaying and sweating before her.

"You damned, blasted liar!" she burst out. "Robbed! You've drunk it, and lost it. You——"

But there speech failed her. For an instant Perris shrank back, thinking she was going to strike him, but the lifted hand dropped to the table, crashing the tin candlestick and its feeble light to the ground. In the darkness he heard Rhoda rush past him, the door open and close with a bang: he knew himself then to be alone. For a few moments he stood muttering to himself, as he again searched pocket after pocket; at last he groped about his feet for the fallen candle, and, having relighted it, set it on the table and wonderingly stared around the house-place. And, crossing over to the door, he pulled it open with a jerk and looked out on the night. The night was as silent as the house, but somewhere in the road outside his straining ears caught the faint patter of hurrying feet.

VII

FOR the second time within that week, Taffendale, smoking his last pipe before going to bed, heard a knock at his door, and again he started in his chair, wondering who could come at such a late hour. But when he opened the door he was not surprised to see Perris's wife; something had told him as he walked down the hall that it was she who stood on his threshold.

Rhoda had fled away from the Cherry-trees in the linen gown in which she had worked all day. The wind had blown the red-gold hair about her face; her cheeks were flushed; her eyes were unnaturally bright; her lips were parted; one hand was clutching the bosom of her gown. And though he was not surprised at the sight of her, Taffendale started as the light of the lamp fell on her face.

"Mrs. Perris!" he exclaimed.

Rhoda stepped in without ceremony.

"Let me come in, Mr. Taffendale," she said. "I—I've come on purpose."

Taffendale silently motioned her to go forward to the parlour; he closed the front door, and soon followed her there.

"What is it?—what's wrong?" he asked. "You haven't come across the fields like that?"

Rhoda was tugging at something which she kept within the bosom of her gown. In her excitement she tore the gown open, revealing more of herself than she was aware of; Taffendale saw that she was unconscious of what she was doing. She pulled out a canvas bag, and laid it on the table between them.

"I've brought your money back," she panted. "At least, what there is left of it. I—I never ought to have come and borrowed. It's no good, Mr. Taffendale—no good! It'll only be wasted. I wish I'd never troubled you. But I'll work myself to skin and bone to pay you back."

Taffendale laid his hand on her arm, and gently pushed her into the chair which he had just quitted.

"Sit down," he said. "Come, now, what's it all about? What's gone wrong? Is it—Perris?"

Rhoda yielded unconsciously to his touch, and sank into the chair. He saw a look that was not far from intense hatred cross her face, and her eyes flashed as she gave him a swift glance.

"Perris!" she exclaimed. "Who else should it be but Perris? I wish to God I'd died the day I set eyes on him! It's no use trying to help a thing like him—he isn't a man, that!"

"Take your time, now," said Taffendale. He went over to the sideboard and brought her a glass of his old port. "Drink it," he said authoritatively.

"Drink it—it'll do you good. And now—what's it all about?"

Rhoda poured out her story to him, gaining relief in confession. Help Perris any further she would not. He could go to the dogs for all she would do to stop him. And when she had made an end of her story she leapt to her feet looking very determined.

"Anyway, I've brought your money back, Mr. Taffendale—what there is left of it, and I'll repay you the rest," she said. "I'll leave that man, and——"

"Stop a bit, stop a bit!" Taffendale broke in. "I lent that money to you, not to Perris. Now then, take that bag back, Mrs. Perris, and just—try again. A man's apt to forget himself at a rent dinner. Take it back, and I'll come and have a talk to Perris to-morrow. Here, put the money in your pocket again."

Rhoda stared at him.

"Do you mean that?" she said suddenly.

"Of course I mean it," answered Taffendale quietly. "It's you that's going to pull things round, don't you see? Come, now, do as I say—put the money up again."

Rhoda hid the canvas bag in her bosom, still staring at him.

"That's right," said Taffendale. "Now, then, I'm going to see you home. And so you came out without anything; here's an old shawl of my house-keeper's—put it on."

But instead of waiting for Rhoda to take the shawl, he wrapped it round her himself. Then he picked up his cap and his stick, and together they went out of the house and into the silence of the night.

VIII

PERRIS, who had slunk off to bed when he found himself left alone, awoke next morning with anticipations of further trouble: he knew his wife well enough by that time to feel assured that she would give him the benefit of her tongue all that day, and the next day, and for many days. He went downstairs quietly in his stockinged feet, and peeping into the house-place, saw Rhoda fast asleep on the old settle. Perris stole over to the hearth, secured the boots which he had left there the previous night, and let himself out into the yard. Sitting on the edge of the well-trough he put the boots on, and then made swiftly in the direction of the field wherein he had slept off his drink. His brain was still clouded and heavy from the previous day's debauch, but he was sensible enough to know that there was a strong probability of his having lost his money at the wheatstack.

"I mun ha' rolled ower i' my sleep, and then it slipped out o' mi pockets," he muttered, as he went over the dew-laden grass. "There's nowhere else where I could ha' lost it, and I mun find it, or else there'll be t' Owd Lad to play wi' Rhoda. It mun be theer!"

But when Perris came to the wheatstack, fully expecting to find his gold and silver on the spot where he had lain, he found nothing, though he got down on hands and knees and examined every foot of the space between the stack and the hedgerow. Then he retraced the path which he had followed from the high-road, and he went down the high-road itself until he was in sight of the Dancing Bear. He went back by the same way, and again examined his resting-

place of the day before ; in the end, as breakfast-time was drawing near, he returned to the farmstead, empty-handed as he had set out. If it had been possible he would have fled to the ends of the earth he knew well what was in store for him.

Pippany Webster, very red about the eyes and tremulous about the lips, was feeding the pigs when Perris crossed the fold on his way to the house. Perris stopped and looked at him.

"Ye were hoeing turnips i' yon five-acre yesterday afternoon?" he said, without preface.

"I wor hoein' turnips theer all t' day," answered Pippany. "Niver did nowt else."

"Did ye see onnybody about i' t' afternoon?" asked Perris. "Any strange folk, like, goin' over yon footpath across t' fields?"

"Noe!" replied Pippany. "I niver seed nobody—leastways, I did see t' parson governess, and t' parson two childer, walkin' across theer wi' their dog. About three o'clock that there wor."

"Did yer see me?" asked Perris.

Pippany looked at his master with the surprise of innocence.

"Ye?" he exclaimed. "No, I niver seed owt o' ye, maister. I thowt ye wor at t' rent dinner."

Perris rubbed his chin and walked into the house. It was in his mind that he would let Rhoda storm while he himself held his peace. He expected to hear her tongue as soon as he crossed the threshold, and he hung his head and rounded his shoulders as he stepped in. After all, he was saying to himself, she was bound to give him his breakfast, and after that he could escape to the fields.

But to Perris's intense surprise no storm of anger and reproach burst upon him. The house-place was tidied up more neatly than was usual ; the breakfast

table was set in the window : two places were laid for his wife and himself, and one for Pippany Webster ; there was a fragrant smell of hot coffee ; and Rhoda was frying bacon at the fire. She half-turned towards him as he entered, and Perris, dull of comprehension as he was, noticed that she was very pale, that there were dark shadows under her eyes, and that in the quick look which she gave him there was some expression which he had never seen there before. He sat down, staring at her, and as he stared he saw her face suddenly suffused with colour.

"Breakfast 'll be ready in a minute," she said, turning away from him to bend over the frying-pan. "The bacon's nearly done."

"Ye're none looking so well this morning, my lass," remarked Perris, not unkindly. "It's a soft thing to lig yerself down and fall asleep on that there old settle as ye've got into t' habit o' doin'. What's t' matter, like, my lass ?"

"It's naught," replied Rhoda. "I've a headache."

"Happen a cup o' coffee 'll improve it," said Perris. "Gow, ye were as white as a mork when I come in, and now ye've turned as red as a rose ! I've no doubt," he continued, rubbing his bony knees with his great hands, and still lost in his surprise that Rhoda should be so quiet, "I've no doubt 'at ye were upset yesterday, my lass, 'cause I didn't come home, and again last night because o' that matter o' losin' t' rebate money. Now, that there rebate money —"

"What's the use of talking about it ?" said Rhoda. "It's done now. All the talking in the world won't alter that. When a thing's done—it's done !"

"I'm none so sure about that there," said Perris, gaining confidence because of his wife's unusual placability. "I'm none goin' to lose my brass wi'out an

effort to find it. You see, my lass, it's true 'at I were a bit overcome wi' t' drink—ye know what these here rent dinners is, and I'm none used to drinkin' sherry wines and suchlike—and t' truth is 'at I went to yon owd wheatstack to sleep it off a bit. But I had that there brass i' my pocket when I went there, and it weren't i' my pocket when I comed home. That's t' truth, Rhoda. An'——"

The scraping of feet outside the door announced the arrival of Pippany Webster for breakfast. He came in and took his accustomed place, and Rhoda, putting the fried bacon on the table, nudged her husband's elbow.

"Say no more now," she whispered. "Wait a bit."

Perris made no answer beyond a stare: he pulled the dish of bacon towards him and began serving the rashers while Rhoda poured out the coffee.

"You needn't give me any bacon," she said suddenly. "I don't want any."

And instead of sitting down at the table, she drank her coffee as she moved about the house-place, doing one small job after another. Perris, unobservant as he was, noticed that she finished her first cup quickly, and helped herself to another before he had done little more than taste his own.

"Ye seem uncommon dry this morning, my lass," he said. "I hope ye're none goin' to be badly."

"I'm all right," she answered. But she finished the second cup as if she was still thirsty as when she first drank: that done, she went upstairs, and they heard her moving about in the bedchamber. When she came down Pippany Webster had finished his breakfast and was going out. Rhoda stopped him with a word. "I want that cow-house cleaning out," she said, turning to Perris. "It wasn't touched yesterday."

"Theer wor no chance o' cleanin' t' cow-house out yisterda'," said Pippany. "T' maister theer said I wor to stick to t' tonnups all day."

"Now then, away and get it done wi'," commanded Perris. "Do it t' first thing."

When Pippany had gone into the farmyard, Rhoda closed the door and turned to her husband. She sat down at the end of the table, between the door and the window, and in such a position that her face was in the shadow of the window curtain. Perris, lighting his clay pipe with a live coal from the fire, looked at her curiously.

"Ye're still paleish, like, my lass," he remarked. "I hope——"

"I'm all right, I tell you," she said hurriedly. "Now then, what about this money. I didn't want you to say aught before Pippany Webster. Where do you say you lost it?"

Perris, always ready to be garrulous, sat down contentedly in the easy-chair by the fire and sucked at his pipe.

"Now, ye see, it were this here way, Rhoda, my lass," he began. "Ye see, there's no denyin' 'at I were the worse for a drop o' drink. And so, thinks I, I'll away and lie down for a piece behind yon owd wheatstack i' t' Four-Acre and sleep it off. And certain sure I am 'at when I went there I had that brass i' my pocket."

"How much?" asked Rhoda.

"There 'ud be three sovereigns and a half-sovereign, and a lot o' silver money," answered Perris. "I wern't that overcome 'at I didn't know what I spent down at t' Bear. I know it were there—it must ha' been there. Why, now then, I slept a lot longer nor what I thowt to do, and when I wakened I come straight home. And then when I were goin' to bring

t' brass out to hand over to ye, my lass, it werrn't there! Didn't I say at t' time 'at I must ha' been robbed? An' I must ha' been!—there's no two ways about it."

Rhoda made no answer. She was sitting with her hands folded in her lap, and she watched Perris in a dull, apathetic fashion, as if he talked of something in which she had no immediate concern or special interest. And Perris went on, glad to hear himself talk.

"Ye see, my lass, there's a footpath across yon fields," he said. "It goes, as ye're aware, reight-aways up fro' t' chappil across my land and over t' high ground as far as Mestur Taffendale's place at t' Limepits. Ye know it, my lass."

Rhoda started.

"Yes," she said in a low voice "I know it."

"Well, ye see, if there's tramps about they might take that there footpath," continued Perris. "And if so be as a feller o' that sort chanced to see me lyin' down at t' back o' yon wheatstack, he could ha' picked my pocket while I were asleep."

Rhoda got up from her seat and began to clear the breakfast things away.

"Wasn't yon Pippany hoeing turnips in the near field to that wheatstack yesterday afternoon?" she asked suddenly.

"He wor, he wor, my lass," replied Perris. "Yes, he were there, were Pippany. He were i' t' Four-Acre and I were i' t' Five-Acre. But he see'd nobody crossin' them fields, 'ceptin' t' parson childer, an' their governess, and t' dog. I axed Pippany about that there this mornin'."

"You'd a deal better have asked him if he'd robbed you," said Rhoda. "If you were so far gone as all that, what had he to do but put his hand in your

pocket? He was there, and I'll lay aught he saw you. And I'll lay aught he's got that money."

Perris, at first hearing this suggestion with an incredulous stare, suddenly leapt to his feet and banged the table.

"By Gow, I niver thowt o' that, Rhoda!" he exclaimed, "Of course, he were there i' t' next field. I'll break every bone i' his body, t' thievin'——"

"Stop a bit," said Rhoda. She pushed Perris back as he made for the door, and motioned to him to sit down again. "I'll call him, and we'll see what he has to say to me. You hold your tongue till I give you the word."

She opened the door, and, going out into the yard, called Pippany from the cow-house. Pippany came slowly across the fold, resentful and grumpy.

"Now then, what is it?" he demanded, as he came inside. "I no sooiner get agate on one job nor I'm called off to another."

Rhoda, who had remained by the door, shut it and set her back against it. She folded her arms and fixed Pippany with a stern look.

"Where's that money you took out of your master's pocket yesterday afternoon when he was asleep?" she demanded. "Hand it out!"

Pippany's jaw dropped, and his weak knees suddenly assumed a new degree of weakness. He was amazed by the directness of Rhoda's charge, and the first thought which flashed into his brain was that he had been watched.

"Now, then, none of your lies!" said Rhoda, quick to detect the signs of Pippany's guilt. "Out with it!"

Pippany recovered his wits. He would brazen matters out.

"Out wi' what?" he demanded. "I've nowt o'

t' maister's—I niver set ees on t' maister fro' yisterda' mornin' till this mornin'."

"You set eyes on him when he was asleep behind that old wheatstack, and you took his money out of his pocket," asserted Rhoda. "You thought nobody was watching you, but other folks can look through hedges as well as you. Now then, out with it!"

"I wish I may be struck down dead if ever——" began Pippany.

Rhoda nodded to Perris. Perris sprang up and seized his man in a firm grip. Rhoda advanced on Pippany as he began to kick and scream.

"Hold him tight while I see what he's got in his pockets," she said. "We'll soon find out what he has about him."

"I'll hev' t' law on both on yer!" yelled Pippany, struggling in Perris's firm grasp. "Ye can't stand to 'sault a body i' this way! I'll summons both on yer afore afore t' magistrates—I'll——"

Rhoda went through Pippany's pockets in thorough fashion, laying their contents on the table as she drew them out. She found some copper and silver in his breeches: in his waistcoat pocket she discovered the tobacco-box. A sudden inspiration prompted her to open it. From the tightly compressed tobacco she produced three sovereigns and a half-sovereign, and at the sight of them Perris shook Pippany until his teeth chattered in his jaws.

"There!" said Rhoda. "You'll go to prison for that, you thief! I knew you'd got it."

"It's—it's mine, I tell you!" screamed Pippany. "It's mi savin's, and ye can't stand to rob a body like that there! I'll——"

In the midst of Pippany's vociferation and moans the door opened. Taffendale, spick and span, walked

in, and stood astonished at the sight which presented itself.

"Hullo!" he exclaimed. "I—I couldn't make anybody hear, so I came in. What's the matter?"

Rhoda, who had turned very pale at the sight of Taffendale, and had as suddenly flushed crimson, gave the visitor a swift look from beneath her eyelids.

"Pippany Webster's been robbing his master," she said in a low voice. "We've just found the money on him."

Perris gave Pippany another savage shake.

"Ho'd yer wisht!" he commanded. "Aye, he's been robbin' me, Mestur Taffendale. Theer's t' money—Rhoda there found it i' his bacca-box. What would you do wi' him, sir?—would you take him down to t' policeman?"

"For the present I should kick him out," said Taffendale, bestowing a careless look on Pippany. "He can't get far away."

Perris wasted no time in carrying this counsel into effect. He ran Pippany to the open door and kicked him into the fold with a force which landed his victim on all fours in the manure. That done, he came back, grinning all over his face.

"Ecod, that'll learn him a lesson!" he said, panting. "Aye, robbed me o' summat like four pound, did t' feller. Sit you down, Mestur Taffendale, sir: we'm proud to see you i' our house, an' I hope——"

"No, thank you," said Taffendale. "I promised your wife the other day that I'd give you a bit of advice about your farm, so if you like, we'll walk round it, and see how things are—I've an hour or so to spare this morning."

Perris picked up his old hat and clapped it on.

"Why, I'm sure it's very good on your part, sir,"

he said. "We'm deeply obliged to you i' many ways. Well, we'll step out then, sir."

Rhoda stood in the window and watched the two men go down the fold together and into the fields. When they were out of sight, she sat down in Perris's chair, and for a long time stared listlessly into the fire. But she was busy enough when Perris came back at noon, rubbing his hands and chuckling.

"He's a reight un to help a body, is yon Mestur Taffendale," he exclaimed. "He's goin' to help us reight: we'm goin' to hev all sorts o' benefits fro' him."

Rhoda made no comment. She was not thinking so much of the benefits which Perris spoke of as of the fact that she and Taffendale had fallen in love with each other.

IX

PIPPANY WEBSTER, summarily discharged by Perris on Taffendale's advice, went away from the Cherry-trees vowing vengeance on Rhoda. He was keen-witted enough to know that it was Rhoda who had detected him in his wickedness; Perris, he felt sure, would never have suspected him from then till Doomsday. He made off to the ramshackle cottage in which he lived at the far end of the village, and there found Tibby Graddige, who, for the consideration of eighteenpence a week, entered upon his domain now and then to set things to rights.

"And what ha' ye come home for at this time o' day?" inquired Tibby Graddige, staring at Pippany in astonishment. "Ha' yer gotten t' belly-ache, or what?"

"I gotten neyther t' belly-ache, nor t' head-ache,

nor onny other aches," answered Pippany. "I've comed home. I can dew as I like i' my own house. I'm t' maister here, onnyway."

By way of proving his lordship Pippany went to a locked cupboard, and produced from it a bottle of rum. He looked round at his neighbour.

"Will yer sup?" he asked. "Ye're welcome, if yer will."

Tibby Graddige affected well-bred reluctance.

"Well, just t' leastest drop i' t' world," she answered.

"Ye needn't be feared," said Pippany handsomely. "I hev another bottle putten away i' t' cupboard."

He poured Mrs. Graddige a liberal allowance of rum into a cracked tea-cup, and gave himself a stronger dose in a mug; Mrs. Graddige produced hot water from the kettle. They pledged each other kindly, and Pippany sat down in his easy-chair and lighted his pipe.

"Aye, I done wi' yon lot," he said. "No more trapesin' up yon hill for me. Mestur Perris, he thinks as how he can dew wi'out me, and he can try—I can dew wi'out him. He'll never find another man to rive his guts out for twelve shillin' a week as I've done."

"No, I'm sure!" assented Tibby Graddige. "I allus said 'at ye weren't properly paid. Of course, you did hev' your meat."

"It wor allus bacon," said Pippany. "If it worn't fried it were boiled, and if it worn't hot it were cowl, and it were bacon whether it wor cowl or yit hot. It wor varry rarely I iver set tooth into fresh butcher meat i' yon house—I niver had such poor atin' i' my life."

"They're poor," remarked Tibby Graddige, sipping her rum-and-water, and shaking her head reflectively. "They're poor. I hev eyes i' my head, and

I've noticed a thing or two. They've gone fro' bad to worse, hev Mestur and Mistress Perris."

"Aye, an' they'll go to still worse," said Pippany. "They've stalled this here last rent-day off, seemi'ly, though it wor held i' t' village 'at they'd niver be able to raise t' brass. But I'll lay owt 'at he'll noän last long, weern't Perris. Theer's nowt on t' place. I wodn't gi' fifty pound for all 'at t' man hes!"

"An' what made yer fratch, like, i' 't' end?" inquired Tibby Graddige. "Wor it summat sudden?"

Pippany mixed himself another mugful of rum-and-water, and wagged his head over the first mouthful of it.

"It wor what ye might call a disagreement," he said. "It wor t' woman's fault. It appears 'at when Mestur Perris went to pay t' rent yisterda' he gat overcome wi' drinkin' sherry wine, and he ligged hissen down to sleep behind t' wheatstack i' t' Fower-acre, and he lost his brass, and this mornin' t' woman accused me o' steysin' it."

"Nay!" exclaimed Tibby Graddige. "Ye don't say! And your poor mother were well known to be t' honestest woman i' all Martinsthorpe!"

"Hev a drop more rum," said Pippany, pushing the bottle across the table. "Aye, we allus had a high character for honesty, all our fam'ly had. Howsomiver, yon woman accused me o' steysin' Mestur Perris's money, and afore I could dew or say owt, t' two on 'em set on to me and 'saulted me shameful, and he varry near squeezed t' life out o' me while shoo felt i' my pockets—I niver were so tret i' my life!"

"And did she find t' brass on yer, then?" inquired Tibby Graddige, greatly excited. "Ye don't say 'at she did!"

"Aye shoo fun' t' brass on me, reight enough," answered Pippany. "There's no denyin' that theer. But, ye see, it wor i' this way—I fun' that theer brass as I were crossin' t' fields to mi wark this mornin', and I put it i' my 'bacca-box for safety, and I wor goin' to ax Mestur Perris's advice about it; but before I'd t' chance o' doin' so, I tell yer they set on to me and knocked me about shameful and crewel, and they accused me o' steysin' it. And so, of course, I left 'em, an' I don't know 'at I shan't tak t' law on 'em. Theer's law for poor folk as well as for onny-body else, and I've a good mind to hev 'em up t' 'Sizes, and see what t' judge says to 'em."

"Aye, but poor folk is sore trodden down!" sighed Tibby Graddige. "They'd sweer theirsens black and blue at ye'd takken t' money. Ye should ha' made safe on it afore they could ha' laid hands on yer."

This was exactly what Pippany was thinking himself; it was poor consolation to reflect that all he had got out of his haul was a couple of bottles of rum, and he wished by that time that he had hidden the gold away in some safe place. But under the influence of his great indignation, and the rum-and-water at his elbow, the future just then looked rosy.

"Ne'er mind," he said, shaking his head threateningly. "I'm noän done wi' yon lot—I'll mak' Mistress Perris suffer for treatin' me as shoo did this mornin'. There's nobody can dew as they like wi' me. I'm noän dependent on Mestur Perris for a job o' work—theer's other folk i' t' parish 'at'll employ me besides him. And I'm noän wi'out a bit o' brass, neyther."

"What, ye gotten summat put by like?" asked Tibby Graddige, instantly curious. "Of course, bein' a single bachelor, ye will hev'."

Pippany wagged his head with mysterious intent.

"Now, then, niver ye mind," he answered. "I'm noän such a fooil as some folks think—I know a thing or two, I can tell yer. I'm happen as weel off as what Mestur Perris is, and I'm noän goin' to be insulted by neyther him nor her."

Thus thrown out of his regular employment, Pippany gathered together a living during the next two or three weeks by following the threshing-machine from farm to farm. It was quite true that he had some money hidden away in a corner of his cottage, but he had a liking for rum, and the store began to diminish. Pippany, however, was a man of infinite resource, and he knew many ways of eking out a living. He grew his own vegetables in his own garden ; he fed, killed, cured and sold a pig every year, but reserved one fitch and one ham for his own consumption ; he knew how to abstract a fat chicken from the neighbouring farmsteads now and then ; he knew how to get fresh eggs without the trouble of paying for them. And upon occasion he knew how to snare a rabbit, and in the proper season his pot was not innocent of the presence of a hare. Appetising odours sometimes hung about Pippany's cottage, and if the gamekeeper had smelt them he might have been suspicious as to their cause ; but the cottage was out of the way, and when Pippany cooked it was behind a jealously-locked door.

His weekly revenue being somewhat shorn by his peremptory dismissal from Cherry-trees, Pippany's predatory instincts were aroused, and he began to poach a little in a quiet and cautious fashion. There was no great danger in following this illegal method of obtaining food. The lord of the manor was an absentee, who never came near the village save at long intervals ; the tenant of the house was an old gentleman who was too much of a recluse to care for sport ; and although a gamekeeper was kept, he was

more for ornament than for use. The gamekeeper certainly went to his bed at a proper and seasonable hour, and did no night patrolling of the woods and coverts which were under his care : Pippany, therefore, had little difficulty about getting a couple of rabbits when he wanted them. Now and then he gave a couple to Tibby Graddige : Tibby took them and asked no questions ; it seemed to her a reasonable thing that a single gentleman who is obliged to buy bread and groceries and rum should eke out his living by appropriating ground game or anything else which costs him nothing.

Eastward of the village, and in the dip of the valley which lay beneath the uplands, whereof Taffendale's farm and lime-quarry formed the centre point, was a thick stretch of old woodland which covered a considerable expanse of country. This was Pippany Webster's favourite hunting-ground ; he knew every yard of it, every turn of the tracks in it ; he could have gone through it blindfold, or on the darkest night. In its very midst was a valley within a valley—a quiet, lonely dingle known to the village folk as Badger's Hollow. Tradition had it that a man had been hanged there in chains, and it was true that from an ancient oak in its midst there still depended some rusty scraps and links of iron which clanked and clinked in the wind when it penetrated through the wood. Therefore, of course, Badger's Hollow was haunted ; no Martinthorpe man or woman would ever have dreamed of venturing near it after nightfall. But Pippany Webster had no fear of ghosts, and he knew Badger's Hollow to be a rare place for rabbits, and when the rest of the village folk were asleep he might have been found making his way through the wood to a favourite spot in this retired place, whereat he had set a snare on the previous night. There had

been times when Pippany had returned from these midnight maraudings with a cock-pheasant in his company.

On the third week after his dismissal from Perris's employ Pippany found no work to do beyond one day's threshing. The three shillings which he received for that was not enough to provide him with rum for the week's consumption, and he had to dip into his secret store. The fact that this was diminishing induced Pippany seriously to consider a proposition which had recently been made to him. During that spring a certain itinerant vendor of fish had started coming round Martinsthorpe and the neighbouring villages; getting into conversation with Pippany in the kitchen of the Dancing Bear, what time no one else was about, he had asked him if he ever had a few rabbits to dispose of. Pippany had returned an evasive answer at the time, but he and the fish-seller had foregathered again, and at last Pippany had a definite offer. After all, there seemed to be small danger about the matter. The country was so lonely, so houseless, about Martinsthorpe, that it would be an easy thing for the man to meet Pippany at an appointed place in some solitary by-way to receive a consignment of dead rabbits, and to pay cash for them on the spot. Pippany decided to commence business on these lines.

And so it came about that one evening, after such darkness had fallen as an early summer night brings, Pippany was in the woods on his way to Badger's Hollow, where he hoped to find a dozen rabbits in his snares. He had traversed those woods hundreds of times o' nights, and had never encountered human being in them. But on this night, as he went noiselessly along, he suddenly became aware of two human beings who were coming his way, and, with the

rapidity of a weasel, he slipped beneath the neighbouring undergrowth and became as quiet as the motionless twigs and leaves which shrouded him. The figures which his sharp eyes had made out came nearer, passed in front of him, passed by him, went on their way into the deeper shades of the wood and disappeared. And Pippany crawled out of his shelter, muttering to himself, and as delighted as he was surprised.

"Taffendale and Perris's wife!" he said. "An' he wor makkin' love to her; he had his arm round her waist. An' her a respectable wed woman! Weel, theer is some wickedness i' this here world. Gow, I wonder what Mistress Graddige 'ud say to that theer?"

But before he returned home in the grey light of morning Pippany had resolved not to communicate his news to Mistress Graddige or to anybody else. He would keep the secret to himself: he was already beginning to see vaguely that it might be profitable. But there was no need to trade on it yet; he had carried out a good transaction with the vendor of fish, and rabbits ran by thousands in the woods.

"But shoo's a bad 'un, is yon Mistress Perris!" reflected Pippany. "An' her that theer religious an' all! I'll go to t' chappil o' Sunda' and hear her sing i' t' choyer."

He carried this design out on Sunday, and heard Rhoda sing a solo at each of the services. She sang better than ever, and the old women wiped tears off their cheeks, and Pippany listened with his mouth wide open. But that night he watched her and Taffendale meet again, and he went home wiser than ever.

X

THE immediate result of Taffendale's visit of advice and suggestion was that Perris suddenly turned over a new leaf and began to mend his ways. He kicked Pippany Webster clear of Cherry-trees, and engaged a more capable man who happened to be out of work at the time. He forswore the Dancing Bear and all other hostelries, and he never went to market unless it was really necessary that he should go there, nor stayed longer in the market-town than his business demanded. He was up early, and he worked hard, and Rhoda had no fault to find with him. He followed out Taffendale's hints: Cherry-trees began to look prosperous. The under-steward reported to his superior that new stock had been put on the farm, and that Perris appeared to be doing well; the neighbouring farmers, looking over the hedges as they rode by, saw that the land was being properly treated, and came to the conclusion that its tenant had got a bit of money from somewhere. But nobody suspected Taffendale of generosity, and only Perris and his wife knew whence this help had come.

"I'm sure we owt to feel deeply obligated to Mestur Taffendale, Rhoda, my lass," Perris would observe, as he sat smoking his pipe at his hearth of a night. "He just come i' the nick of time, as it weer. Now, ye see, my lass, all them there bits o' good advice as he gev' me have all turned out well, and ye'll see 'at there 'll be no need for us to go to him nor to any other for help about t' next half-year's rent. He's what I call a reight friend, is yon there man, and I hope ye feel as grateful to him as what I do, my lass."

And Rhoda always replied that she felt very much obliged to Mr. Taffendale, and that it was very

kind of him to take so much interest in them. She was more than surprised that Perris had developed such a strong line of good purpose and endeavour, and sometimes she found herself looking at him wonderingly, and speculating as to whether he was not a better man than she thought him. All his thought and attention was now given to his work ; he appeared to have no time for anything else, and it was an easy matter to hoodwink and deceive him. He never asked questions of his wife when she seemed to be unduly late home from the chapel ; he was, in fact, usually fast asleep in bed when Rhoda came in from her meetings with Taffendale, and he had forgotten by next morning whether she had been out or not. The new interest in his farm which Taffendale's friendly intervention had given him had driven all other matters out of Perris's mind ; his one idea now was to make things pay, and Rhoda found that, instead of being obliged to goad him to work, she had nothing to do but to stand by and see him ceaselessly labouring. She and Taffendale looked on at Perris's new line of conduct from a detached point of view ; it suited them both that his attention was fully occupied ; careful to the finest degree about their assignments, they believed that the secret between them was their own, and that they were safe from discovery. Taffendale never came to the little farmstead ; now and then, riding past, he exchanged a few words with Perris over the top of the hedgerow ; sometimes he talked to husband and wife together at the orchard gate : it was his idea to keep the world from knowing that he was in any way mixed up with them. The folk of the village in the valley, who rarely went up the hillside to the uplands, knew nothing of the links between the rich man at the Limepits and the Perrises of the Cherry-trees.

Pippany Webster kept his knowledge of the love affairs of Mr. Taffendale and Mrs. Perris to himself during the summer that followed his summary dismissal from Perris's employment. He had got another regular job ; he could always add a half-sovereign to his week's wages by his transactions with the itinerant fish-vendor, and there seemed to be no immediate reason for turning his knowledge to account. At that time, indeed, being in full feather as regards money, he had no idea of profiting pecuniarily by that knowledge : his great idea was to revenge himself on Rhoda. He became an adept in tracking her ; many a night when she went away from the choir-practice he followed her to lonely parts of the adjacent woods, and was witness to her meetings with Taffendale, and he chuckled to himself as he thought of the time when he would expose her treachery to Perris and let the small world around them know what manner of woman she was.

"It'll be a nice come-down for mi lady, will that theer !" he mused. "An' a bonny come-up for t' Methodisses to hear 'at their fine leadin' singer i' t' choyer-pen's carryin' on wi' Taffendale same as if shoo wor one o' them leet wimmen 'at they talk about. Nobbut wait a bit, mi lass, and I'll mak' ye as ye'll repent takkin' that bit o' brass out o' my pocket—I will so !"

Although he told her nothing in return, Pippany extracted all the news that he could get from Tibby Graddige. He heard of the altered condition of things at Cherry-trees ; of the reformation of Perris himself ; of the growing prosperity which was manifesting itself in various ways. And his ferret-like wits began to put two and two together ; he suddenly saw where the help had come from, and he developed long fits of thinking and scheming, all with a view to

Mrs. Perris's discomfiture. But he would bide his time—yon there Taffendale, he reminded himself, had said, when he counselled Perris to kick him out, that he, Pippany, couldn't get far away—no, and neither could Taffendale nor Mrs. Perris get far away. He would wait—but he would be down on them when the right time came.

It was Tibby Graddige who brought Pippany news which made him think that possibly the right time had come. Entering his cottage one evening towards the end of that summer, in order to put things to rights, and incidentally to partake of the drop of rum to which its lord and master was always ready to treat her, she revealed a countenance suggestive of important tidings.

"It wodn't surprise me to hear 'at Mestur Perris is goin' to come into a bit o' money," she observed.

"Wodn't it?" said Pippany. "Aw! An' wheer might it be comin' fro', like?"

Mrs. Graddige wiped her lips with the edge of her apron, and Pippany pushed the rum bottle over to her, and motioned her to the cracked tea-cup out of which she usually took her refreshment.

"This afternoon as ever were," said Mrs. Graddige, having tasted her drink and made a face over it, "me and Mistress Perris bein' engaged in hingin' out the clothes i' that theer orchard wheer you come by your accident—and a rare mercy it were as you didn't meet wi' yer death, as I've remarked many a time and oft, and shall agen—theer come a tallygrapht, which I never remember nowt o' t' sort ever comin' theer afore while I've known that place, and of course gev' me t' spasms i' mi insides. Mestur Perris, he were down t' little field t'other side o' t' orchard, a-talkin' to Mestur Taffendale over t' hedge top, so Mistress Perris, she oppened it. 'Mercy on us!' she says,

just like that heer. "Mercy on us, Mestur Perris's 'Uncle George is dead!' "

"Who's his Uncle George?" asked Pippany.

"His Uncle George were a draper, at Fenford, away there i' t' low country, and had money, bi what I heard," answered Tibby Graddige. "I've heerd speyk of him afore. Howsomiver, he were dead, accordin' to t' tallygrapht, and Mistress Perris she waved t' paper to Mestur Perris to come, and Mestur Taffendale, he rode his horse up t' hedgeside wi' him. 'Yer Uncle George is dead, and they want you to go at once,' says Mistress Perris. 'Ye'd better change yer things and set off,' she says. 'An' you won't lose no time,' she says, ' 'cause there's none so many trains that way, and it's gettin' on for five now, and the station's four mile off.' 'Here, I'll tell you what,' says Mestur Taffendale, friendly like, 'I'll lend yer my horse, Perris, and ye can leave him at t' inn at Somerleigh station, and I'll send one o' my men over for him to-night.' 'Why, thankin' you kindly, Mestur Taffendale,' says Mestur Perris. 'Aye,' he says, 'I'd best go,' he says. 'I shouldn't wonder if mi Uncle George hes left me a bit o' money,' he says. 'He allus promised 'at he wod,' he says. 'Why, then, be off and see after it,' says Mestur Taffendale, and he rode t' horse into t' orchard, and gat off it, and they all then went into t' house. An' i' less than a quarter of an hour Mestur Perris rode off on Mestur Taffendale's horse, to go and fetch his fortune."

"Did it say owt about t' fortune i' t' tallygrapht?" inquired Pippany.

"Why, no, not as Mistress Perris read it out," replied Mrs. Graddige. "But, of course, theer's allus a fortune or summat o' that sort when folks sends tallygraphts. An' varry lucky it were, as I

said to Mistress Perris, 'at Mestur Taffendale happened to be theer to gi' t' poor man a lift on his horse. It 'ud ha' been dowly wark, walkin' four mile to t' station wi' a load o' grief on yer back, and wonderin' all t' way how much money t' dead man had left yer."

"Aye, it wod so!" agreed Pippany. "He'd feel t' matter less when he wor mounted on hossback. An' so Mestur Taffendale 'ud hev to walk home on his own feet, like?"

"Why, it's none so far fro' t' Cherry-trees to t' Limepits," observed Tibby Graddige. "Aye, he went his ways when Mestur Perris had ridden off. 'I hope yer husband 'll hev' some good news, Mrs Perris,' he says, when he went away. 'An' bring home a handsome fortun', he says, laughin'—that's what he said, did Mestur Taffendale."

"He'll hev' to stop till t' buryin's over," said Pippany. "They niver part wi' a dead man's brass till t' corpse is i' t' grave—that's t' law, so they tell me. Them 'at's appointed to look after t' corpse's money niver pays it out until all's overed and done wi' i' t' way o' buryin'."

"Eh, an' I wonder what t' reason o' that is?" inquired Tibby Graddige. "Theer mun be a reason, of course."

"It's so 'at t' dead body can't hear what t' relations says about it when they hev' t' brass 'livered up to 'em," replied Pippany. "Theer's allus some on 'em 'at isn't satisfied wi' what they receive, an' then they say foul things about t' dead corpse, and, of course, it wodn't be reight for it to hear owt said agean it, so they allus mak' away wi' it afore sharin' t' brass out—that's t' law, as they call it. So Mestur Perris 'll be away for a day or two, like?"

"Aye, and she'll be left alone all by hersen i' that

lonely house," answered Mrs. Graddige. "I made offer to go and stop wi' her, but she said she were none afraid."

"Shoo's afraid o' nowt, isn't that theer," observed Pippany. "Shoo's as strong as onny man, shoo is. And I reckon theer's nowt 'at's worth steysin' i' t' place now, whatever there may be when Mr. Perris brings his Uncle George's fortune back wi' him."

But whether there was anything that was worth stealing or not at Cherry-trees, Pippany Webster could not refrain from visiting the little farmstead that night. He sat by his own fireside for a long time after Mrs. Graddige had finished her charing work, drunk her second drop of comfort, and gone away with a present of a couple of rabbits, and when he at last turned out his lights, damped his fire, and locked up the front door it was only to let himself out at a back window and to slink away in the darkness. By various quiet and devious ways he made his way up the hillside, and to the outbuildings at Cherry-trees. The clock in the church tower was striking ten when he looked cautiously round the corner of the barn and saw that a light was still burning in the house: he saw, also, that it did not proceed from the house-place, but from the parlour, a room which, according to his experience of them, the Perrises scarcely ever used.

Knowing every nook and corner of the premises, Pippany had no difficulty in finding a convenient vantage-point in the outbuildings from whence to keep observation on the house. Taking advantage of the darkness he stole up the steps of the granary, and took up his post at a slatted window which commanded the door. The night was warm, and Pippany was well accustomed to long vigils in the woods. He had an instinctive notion that he would

be rewarded for his trouble in spying upon Mrs. Perris, and he was prepared to keep watch until the coming of the morning would make it impossible for him to remain longer in his hiding-place. But he had not been very long in the granary when he heard footsteps on the road outside, followed by the opening and shutting of the orchard gate. A moment later the figure of a man covered the lighted window, and Pippany hugged himself with joy.

"Yon's Taffendale!" he muttered to himself. "Gow, I thowt I should see summat!"

For a time he was half-minded to hasten down the hill, to wake Tibby Graddige from her slumbers, and to hurry her back with him, and thus to provide a further witness of Mrs. Perris's misdoings. But on second consideration he thought it best to keep his knowledge to himself, for he was as yet uncertain as to what use he should put it. With a patience which had been steadily perfected by his poaching habits, he settled down to watch; if it were necessary, he said to himself, he would watch throughout the night, for he was determined not to leave his post until Taffendale had gone away from Cherry-trees.

"I wonder what Perris 'ud say if he see'd a leet i' t' best parlour?" he mused. "Him an' her niver sits i' t' best parlour—t' house-place is good enoo for them when they're by their two sens. I reckon shoo thinks 'at it wodn't do for a gentleman like Taffendale to sit hissen down i' t' house-place—that's what shoo's gotten t' best parlour ready for."

In the silence and darkness of the granary Pippany waited while the slow hours passed. Now and then a rat scampered across the floor behind him; sometimes the horses in the stables stamped their feet; at intervals an owl in the neighbouring woods hooted dolefully across the sleeping land;

eleven and twelve and one and two struck from the church clock at the further end of the village. And just as the first grey of the approaching day stole across the line of the eastern world the watcher's long vigil came to its end—Taffendale left the house and went quietly away through the orchard. With equal quietness and precaution Pippany quitted his post and went home.

XI

PERRIS had gone away on a Wednesday to attend the obsequies of his Uncle George; on the following Saturday afternoon he returned home, looking lost and disconsolate. Rhoda learnt at once from his face that the deceased draper had not remembered his nephew in his will.

"I might as well ha' stayed at home," said Perris, sinking into his easy-chair. "There were nowt to be gotten by it."

"Do you mean to say that he didn't leave you anything?" exclaimed Rhoda. "Not—anything?"

"Nowt!" replied Perris. "An' he didn't leave our John William owt, either. He left nobody nowt. What brass he did leave were left to start a almshouse, as they call it, for t' townsfolk o' Fenford. It seems a queer thing to me 'at they can stand by a will like that theer, considerin' 'at he hed rellytives; but t' lawyers says it's all reight—nobody can upset it. T' man hed a reight, they say, to leave his brass as he liked."

"And how much had he to leave?" asked Rhoda.

"A matter o' five or six thousand pound," replied Perris, shaking his head dolefully. "I wodn't ha'

cared if he'd left me a thousand on it—I consider 'at me an' our John William were entitled to as much as that apiece. Howsomiver, theer it is—t' owd feller's left us nowt. It's a varry great disappointment to me, Rhoda, my lass—I'd aimed to repay Mestur Taffendale his money out o' that theer."

"Mr. Taffendale will wait," said Rhoda. She began to bustle about, and to prepare some supper for Perris, and, greatly to his surprise, she produced a bottle of whisky and mixed a glass for him. "It's no use taking it to heart, Abel," she said, as she handed him the glass. "We've managed without your Uncle George's money so far, and we can manage without it now."

Perris took the glass of whisky-and-water from her with a humble expression of thanks. He was tired and weary, and life had looked very drab to him during his four miles' walk from the station.

"Aye, but I could ha' done wi' a bit o' money," he said. "And so could our John William. Howsomiver, I suppose it's as you say, Rhoda, my lass—it's no use takin' t' matter to heart. I mun put mi shoulder to t' wheel a bit more. After all, we've gotten a roof over our heads, and t' farm's lookin' up i' promisin' fashion—thanks to Mestur Taffendale. All t' same, I wor a good deal cast down when t' lawyer read t' will out."

That night Rhoda was unusually attentive to her husband. She gave him an appetising supper, and mixed him another glass of whisky before he went to bed. Next day, being Sunday, she roasted one of her spring chickens for dinner, and Perris began to forget some of his troubles. He went with her to the chapel in the afternoon, and listened with great pride to her singing. The preacher went home to take tea with them, and Perris listened to him and

to Rhoda as they discussed chapel affairs. But when it was time to return for the evening service he announced his intention of staying at home.

"I think I shan't go down to t' chappil agen to-night, my lass," he said. "I'm feeling a bit tired, like, wi' trailin' about this last two or three days, and I'll bide at home, quiet, 'cause I've a hard day afore me to-morrow."

"All right," said Rhoda. She went into the parlour, and came back with the key of the cupboard in which she kept certain things rigorously locked up. "I might be a bit late," she continued, "because I promised to go see Mrs. Simpson after chapel—their Mary Jane's not well. So you can get your supper when you want it, and there's the key if you want aught else."

"Very good, my lass, very good," said Perris. "I shall away to mi bed early."

He watched Rhoda and the preacher set out across the fields, and for a time after their departure occupied himself in feeding the pigs and fowls and in looking round the fold. And he was just thinking of settling down to his pipe, and to the study of a tract with which the preacher had presented him, when, happening to look through the window, he caught sight of Pippany Webster's horse-like countenance peeping over the wall which separated the farmyard from the orchard. As Perris looked, Pippany's face disappeared, as though he had suddenly ducked behind the wall; in another moment it appeared again. Pippany was evidently taking a view of the house.

"What's yon repscallion doin' about t' place?" thought Perris. "Happen he thinks we've all gone to t' chappil, and he wants to steyl summat. He's up to no good, anyway."

He caught up his ashplant switch from its corner and made for the door, but when he opened it Pippany had disappeared again. Perris strode across the fold, and looked over the wall just as Pippany, who had not heard him approaching over the litter, once more lifted his head. The two men stared at each other across the wall.

"What are ye doin' on my premises?" demanded Perris.

Pippany grinned sheepishly, but he looked at his late employer with a species of sly defiance. He was not afraid of Perris, and he knew that Rhoda was safe in the singing-pew at the chapel.

"Didn't I warn yer niver to set foot o' my land agen?" continued Perris. "Ye're up to no good—ye're for steysin' t' fowls or t' eggs, or summat."

"I'm for steysin' nowt," retorted Pippany. "Theer's no 'casion for me to steyl, Mestur Perris. I'm better off nor I were when I worked for ye."

Perris flourished his ashplant.

"What are yer theer for, then?—sneakin' behind t' wall," he asked. "I expect ye thowt we were all gone to t' chappil, did yer?"

"I knew ye hedn't gone to t' chappil," answered Pippany, grinning. "I see'd t' missis go wi' t' preycher chap. I—I wanted to hev' a word wi' ye, mestur."

Perris vouchsafed no reply; he continued to glare angrily at his visitor.

"A quiet word, like," said Pippany. "I gotten summat to tell yer, mestur—summat 'at ye owt to know."

Perris looked steadily and searchingly into Pippany's shifty eyes. And Pippany grinned anew.

"I want to hev' nowt to do wi' t' likes o' ye," said Perris slowly. "Tak' yersen off my premises, afore I lay this here ashplant across yer shoulders!"

But Pippany stood his ground, and he grinned again.

"If I don't tell what I hev' to tell I can go an' tell som'dy else," he said. "I come i' a friendly way, mestur. Ye'd better hear what I gotten to say."

Perris meditated awhile. His fingers itched to give Pippany a sound belabouring, but he saw that the man had some deep design, and his curiosity was aroused.

"What ha' yer gotten to say?" he asked dubiously. "I reckon it'll be nowt but a pack o' lies when all's said and done."

"It's no lies, mestur—it's t' Gospil truth," answered Pippany, with great eagerness. "It's summat 'at ye owt to be made aweer on—I'll tak' my 'davy it is!"

"Well?" said Perris.

Pippany, who had edged away a little from the wall which separated them, drew nearer.

"Will yer promise not to meddle on me wi' t' ashplant if I tell yer?" he asked. "It's nowt varry pleasant 'at I hev' to tell, but it's none my fault, mestur."

"Go on," said Perris. "An' no lies!"

"I wish I may be struck down dead this varry minute if I tell ye owt 'at isn't t' truth!" exclaimed Pippany, with pious fervour. He came up close to the wall and thrust his face over it. "Mestur!" he said in a low voice, "do ye know 'at your missis is carryin' on wi' Taffendale?"

Perris's first instinct was to slash Pippany across the face with the ashplant, and Pippany saw the intention in his eyes and started back from the wall with a cry of alarm. But Perris's left hand seized the other end of the ashplant. The switch, supple and yielding though it was, snapped in two as if it had

been as brittle as a glass rod, and for a moment he stood staring stupidly at the two halves into which it had broken. Then he looked up and at the man who was shrinking away from him.

"If ye're tellin' me a lie," he said, in a voice that made Pippany shake in his Sunday clothes, "by God, I'll tear t' tongue out o' yer throat!"

"It's not a lie, mestur. I wish t' Lord may strike me blind and dumb and dead an' all this varry instant if it's a lie!" said Pippany excitedly. "It's as true as—as 'at you an' me's here. It's all true, mestur."

Perris stared at Pippany for a full moment without speaking. His face had become of a curious grey colour, but there was a bright spot of red burning on each high cheekbone, and his eyes blazed with a strange light. And suddenly he thrust his hands deep into the pockets of his breeches, and, turning his back to the wall, leaned against it, and fixed his gaze on the open door of the house.

"Say what ye hev' to say," he said over his shoulder.

Pippany realised that he was safe from assault. He stole up to the wall and addressed himself to Perris's averted head. And as if he were making confession of his own misdeeds, he spoke in a low voice, occasionally hushing it to a whisper.

"Well, ye see, mestur, it were i' this way 'at I found it out," he began. "Ye see, one night, at after ye sent me away, I wor i' t' woods yonder down theer by what they call Badger's Hollow—ye know how quiet it is theer, mestur—an' yeer missis and Taffendale come along—sweetheartin'. Theer was no doubt about it, mestur, 'cause I see'd 'em—I see'd more nor what they'd ha' liked me to see. An' I see'd 'em many a time at after that—gen'lin's o' Sunday nights, and t' choyer practice nights, when yeer missis hed come away thro'

t' chappil. Used to meet i' them woods, they did, mestur—ye know as weel as I do 'at nobody iver goes there o' nights. Ye mun ha' known 'at shoo wor out late, mestur? "

Perris made no answer. He was still staring at the open door of the house. But he had withdrawn his hands from his pockets, and had folded them tightly across his chest, as if there was something there that he must repress and keep from breaking loose. And Pippany, getting no answer to his suggestion, went on with his story.

"An' I wor minded to come an' tell ye at t' time, mestur," he said, "but then I thowt it ovver and ovver, and I didn't reightly know what to do. Howsomiver, t'other day, Mistress Graddige, shoo telled me 'at ye'd hed news o' yer Uncle George deëath, and 'at ye'd gone away to bury him and tak' up yer fortune, and so I thowt to misen 'at I'd find out if mi suspicions wor reight about Taffendale and yeer missis; and so that night 'at ye went off—last Wensda' night it wor, as ye'll rek'lect—I come up here and watched t' house. I got into t' granary theer, and posted misen wheer I could see t' door yonder. It wor ten o'clock then—I heerd it strike fro' t' owd church clock i' t' village. An' afore varry long I see'd Taffendale come—I see'd him pass t' leeted window."

Still Perris gave no response and made no sign. He heard every word that was being whispered behind him, and something told him that it was all true.

"But t' leet worn't i' t' house-place theer," continued Pippany. "It wor i' t' best parlour. I thowt that wor queer, mestur, because ye and t' missis niver used t' best parlour 'at I remember on. An' of course theer wor nowt for it then but waitin'. An' I waited while t' clock struck eleven, and twelve, and one, and two, and it wor gettin' on to three

and t' light wor just comin' when Taffendale let hissen out and went away. An'—an' that's all, mestur, and as I say, ye owt to know about it. An' if I've tow'd ye onny lies, ye're welcome to rive my tongue out o' mi throoät whenever ye like ! But I hev'n't—I've telled ye t' Gospil truth."

For a time Perris made no movement. His thoughts had shifted themselves to the chapel down in the valley. He knew that Rhoda was going to sing a solo that night as an anthem ; she had been practising it all the week, and the preacher had talked about it with eager anticipation while they had tea together. It was about time for the anthem : he imagined her standing up in the shabby little conventicle, and holding spellbound the congregation huddled together on the rudely fashioned benches and the folk who listened at the gates and fences of the adjoining cottages. It was a beautiful anthem ; Perris knew nothing of music, but he had found himself rapt and motionless more than once as Rhoda moved about the house singing it without accompaniment. Yes, she would be just about singing it now—little imagination as he possessed, he could see her, and see, too, the last beams of the westering sun shining in through the chapel windows and gleaming on her hair. . . .

" T' Gospil truth," repeated Pippany Webster, at the other side of the wall. " Nowt but t' Gospil truth, Mestur Perris, sir."

Perris started and shivered.

" Ha' you said a word o' this to onnybody else ? " he asked in a voice that seemed to himself to be a long way off. " Ha' you, now ? "

" Not a word, mestur ! " asserted Pippany. " Not a word to nobody. I've kep' it to myself."

" Nowt to yon Tibby Graddige ? " asked Perris.

Pippany uttered a snort of derision.

"Her?" he said. "Noe!—not likely, mestur. I wodn't trust no woman wi' a secret like that theer. I tell yer, I've said nowt to nobody."

Perris remained leaning against the wall, his eyes always fixed on the open door of the house. Behind him, Pippany, waiting for him to speak, began to pick off the moss and lichen which had grown on the old masonry.

"When ye been i' them woods," said Perris at last, "when ye been i' them woods yonder, at nights, ha' you iver seen onnybody else hangin' about?"

"No, mestur. There's nobody goes into them woods at nights," replied Pippany, with decision. "Nobody wo'd go. Ye know 'at yon theer place wheer—wheer I see'd them—is what they call haunted—there's a sperrit walks theer. No—I never seen nobody about them woods—'ceptin' them."

"What about t' gamekeeper?" asked Perris.

Pippany laughed with further derision.

"T' gam'keeper niver goes theer," he answered. "He's ower fond o' stoppin' indoors, is t' gam'-keeper. If he iver goes that way he niver gets no forrarder nor t' Dancin' Bear. I been all ower them woods at night, an' I niver seen nobody—'ceptin' them."

Perris moved away from the wall. Without looking at Pippany, he flung him a word over his shoulder.

"Show me wheer ye posted yersen i' that granary t' other night," he said.

Pippany moved round to the gate of the fold with alacrity. He was convinced by that time that Perris would do him no hurt, and he had the fervour of the born busybody, and was delighted at the prospect of showing his cleverness in playing the spy. He

shambled across the litter of the fold and up the steps of the granary, with Perris at his heels. As they entered, a big grey rat scuttered across the floor, stopped at the mouth of its hole in one corner, looked at them a second out of its beady eyes, and disappeared. To Perris the place seemed strangely quiet and unfamiliar.

Pippany went over to the slatted window and pushed the slats aside. He pointed a crooked forefinger towards the house.

"Here's wheer I stood, ye see, mestur," he said eagerly. "Ye can see t' house i' full fro' here. Yon's t' best parlour window wheer t' light wor burnin' when Taffendale cam' at ten o'clock. Aye, he were wi' her in theer a good four hours, an'——"

Perris had walked close behind Pippany as they entered the granary, and he was still closer as Pippany leaned into the window-place, thrusting his fingers through the slats. And suddenly, obeying an uncontrollable impulse, he lifted his hands, and, seizing Pippany by the throat, twisted him round and threw him on his back across a pile of wheat which had been emptied on the floor of the granary at a recent threshing. And Perris, conscious now of no other desire than to kill, fell heavily upon his victim, his hands tightly clutching the man's gullet, and slowly and surely squeezing the life out of him in a grip which never relaxed. He gave no attention to the convulsive struggles of the body beneath him, to the kicking of the legs, the frantic beatings and tearings of the arms and hands: all that he knew was that he had his man by the throat, and that he must hold on there until all was quiet. It seemed scarcely a minute before the last unconscious struggle faded into a mere movement, a tremor which ran through the

body and shivered into his own ; but when the limbs relaxed and the eyelids slowly dropped across the bulging eyes he still held on, pressing his long, sinewy fingers more tightly into the dead man's throat. And the granary grew so quiet, so silent, that the grey rat put its head out of the hole in the corner, and Perris saw its black eyes gleaming like tiny sparks of fire in the gloom.

He got up at last, and unconsciously wiped away the flecks of white froth that had gathered on his lips. He lifted his right hand higher and brushed off the sweat from his forehead ; then he looked at both hands curiously as if he expected to see something on them. And as if they were numb, or hurt him, he began to rub them together. All this time his eyes strayed anywhere but to the body which lay twisted up on the heap of yellow wheat at his feet ; when he finally turned to it, there was a look of curiosity and speculation in his face. He stretched out his foot and touched it gingerly with the point of his boot. Something in the contact made him start, and he looked round about him with a quick, searching glance. The grey rat, watching him stealthily, vanished affrighted into the blackness behind it.

Perris's glance lighted on a pile of old sacks which lay on the further side of the granary. He went over and tore the pile apart ; returning to the body, he dragged it across the floor into the shadow and covered it with the sacks. Then, taking up a broom, he carefully swept the boards clear of the grains of wheat which had been scattered broadcast in the brief struggle ; there was a deep depression in the heap itself, and he smoothed it over with the head of the broom. And just as the sun sank behind the ridge of the house he went down from the granary and

entered the door which he had left open only half-an-hour previously.

Some instinct made Perris go to the sink in the kitchen and wash his hands, and as he washed and dried them he again looked at them with strange inquisitiveness. When they were dried he thrust them into his pockets ; one hand encountered the key which Rhoda had handed to him before she set out for the chapel. With another instinctive notion Perris went over to the cupboard in the parlour in which his wife kept the whisky, and, taking out the bottle, helped himself to a stiff dram. Something told him, as he slowly drank it, that there was no fear of his getting drunk that night—not all the whisky in the world would have made him drunk. And, setting the glass down on the table in the house-place, he took his pipe from the mantelpiece, and filling it from the old leaden tobacco-box which stood on a shelf by his easy-chair, he lighted it with a coal from the fire, and began to smoke as calmly as if nothing had happened. The tract which the preacher had given him just before leaving for the chapel lay on the table where Perris had thrown it, and he picked it up and read some paragraphs of it between his gulps of the whisky-and-water. The tract was all about the terrors of hell ; he began to wonder in vague fashion if Pippany Webster was already experiencing them.

It was dusk by that time, and Perris knew that there was work before him, but he finished his drink and his pipe leisurely. When both were done, he knocked the ashes out of the pipe and put the whisky bottle away, before going outside the house and turning the corner into a strip of neglected ground which lay beneath the gable end. It was neither garden nor orchard, though an apple-tree shaded it and neglected gooseberry bushes grew rank in it. Once upon a time some

former tenant of the Cherry-trees had conceived the notion of sinking a well there, and had penetrated into the soil to a considerable depth, only to give up the attempt. The cavity so made had never been filled up ; its mouth was protected by rough planking ; over the planking there had stood for the past year a derelict reaping-machine, one of the many ancient wrecks which had congregated about the farmstead. Perris looked at it musingly as he stood beneath the apple-tree in the rapidly gathering gloom. It would be easy to move ; it would be easy to move two or three of the rotting planks on which it stood ; the unfinished well beneath them would do well enough for Pippany Webster's grave. But the darkness must come first.

Perris knew that there was no fear of interruption. Few people ever came by the Cherry-trees at night ; if they did, you could hear their footsteps on the road before they were anywhere near. The desolate bit of ground was thickly shielded from the lane which ran behind it ; in the darkness no one could see what was happening there. And it was not likely that Rhoda would be home before half-past ten ; he knew her Sunday night habits of late, though until that night he had never known the reason of them.

So Perris waited, leaning over the wall of the fold and watching the familiar shapes about him grow less and less distinct in the gathering darkness. At last, when night had fairly settled over the land, he set about his task. It was a plain and an easy task, and in a few minutes it was all over ; the dead man was in the ooze and slime at the bottom of the unfinished well, the planks were in their place again, and the crazy reaping-machine was pushed back upon them. And in the silence which always brooded over the uplands at night, Perris went back into his house and

lighted the lamp and his pipe, and, helping himself to another glass of whisky, sat down again and resumed his reading of the tract. And more than once, as the writer described the torments which those who are lost must needs experience, Perris again thought of Pippany Webster, and wondered if what he read was true. He possessed the countryman's almost superstitious reverence for printed matter, and knowing the preacher who had given him the tract to be a worthy man, he came to the conclusion that the account now presented to him was founded upon fact. And as he drank off his whisky, preparatory to unlacing his Sunday boots, he shook his head.

"Well, he wor a reight bad 'un, wor yon Pippany Webster," he muttered, "a reight, rank bad 'un!"

He lay awake after he had gone to bed, and listened for Rhoda's return. She had taken to occupying the spare chamber, and Perris had never troubled himself about her likes or dislikes. As a strict rule he fell asleep as soon as his head touched the pillow, but on this night he remained purposely alive to all sounds until he heard her come in and presently enter the opposite room. Then he slept, and remained sleeping soundly until he suddenly awoke to find the morning sun shining, and to hear Rhoda moving about in the house-place. When he went down and met her it was only to begin the ordinary routine of his everyday life, and she observed nothing in his manner or conduct then or thereafter to show her that he had passed through any unusual experience.

XII

ON the second day after Pippany Webster received his dismissal from this world at the hands of Perris, Uscroft, another small farmer of Martinsthorpe, who

had given Pippany a regular job at thatching, knocked at Tibby Graddige's door, and, when she opened it, looked doubtfully at her.

"Don't ye clean up, like, for yon Pippany Webster?" he asked.

"I do what bit o' cleanin' t' man needs, mestur," answered Tibby Graddige. "It's none so much, 'cause he's one o' t' sort that likes to do things for theirsens."

"Ha' you seen aught on him this last day or two?" said Uscroft. "Yesterda' or to-day, like?"

"Yesterda' were Monday, and to-day, of course, is Tuesday," remarked Mrs. Graddige, reflectively. "No, mestur, I seen nowt on him sin' Sunday afternoon. I gen'lins go in to clear up o' Tuesdays and Fridays afternoons or nights, as the case may be. There's nowt wrong, mestur?"

Uscroft scratched his head, and put his thumbs in the armholes of his waistcoat.

"T' man's never been to his work either yesterda' or to-day," he answered. "I gev' him a job at thack-ing my stacks, and I'm afraid t' weather's goin' to break."

Mrs. Graddige looked across her garden in the direction of Pippany Webster's cottage, which stood, lonely and half derelict, higher up the side of the hill.

"Ha' you been to t' cottage then, mestur?" she asked. "He's happen been ta'en badly—not 'at I've heard owt about it. But then, ye see, mestur, nobody ever goes near him—he's such a queer 'un 'at he'll bear nobody to step inside his premises, 'ceptin' when I go to do a bit of cleanin'."

"I've been to t' place," replied Uscroft. "It's locked up, and I looked through t' front window; but I could see naught, except 'at there were no fire in t' grate."

Tibby Graddige rubbed her elbows, which she had just withdrawn from the washtub.

"Well, I'm sure I couldn't say where he is, Mestur Uscroft," she said. "Of course, he's that queer, is Pippany, 'at I should never be surprised at owt he did, in a way o' speakin'. As I say, I never set eyes on him sin' Sunday afternoon—I dropped in then when he were takin' a cup o' tea. He said naught to me about goin' away, nor nowt o' that sort. But, of course, he has relations livin' over yonder at Stoneby, and he might ha' taken it into his head to go there. I know he hasn't been to see 'em for a long time."

Uscroft turned in the direction of Mrs. Graddige's garden gate.

"Well, if ye see aught on him when he comes back," he said, "ye can just tell him 'at he needn't trouble hisself to come near my place again. I'm none goin' to hev t' likes o' him playin' fast and loose wi' me. Here's a day and a half's work lost at yon thackin'. I should ha' been seekin' him yesterday, only I were away all t' day. Ye tell him what I say, missis—I want no more on him."

"I'm sure ye don't, mestur," said Mrs. Graddige, who was always ready to agree with everybody. "Oh, I'll tell him, right enough, but he's that queer, is Pippany, 'at he doesn't care what trouble he occasions."

"Well, he'll 'casion me no more," growled Uscroft. "So ye can tell him, straight."

He went away up the lower part of the village, and, it being then eleven o'clock, turned into the Dancing Bear, at the door of which stood the cart of the itinerant vendor of fish and secret purchaser of poached rabbits. Within the kitchen the fish-man himself sat in a corner near the fire, eating bread-and-cheese and pickled onions with the help of a clasp-

knife ; in the window-place, reading the local newspaper, sat Justice, the gamekeeper, dividing his attention between the news and a pint of ale. His dog, a wicked-looking lurcher, which bore the traces of a hard and warring life, sat with one ear cocked before the fish-man, expectant of occasional charity. Uscroft called for a drink, and, sitting down against the opposite wall, looked fixedly at the fish-man.

"Don't ye come through Stoneby on yer way here?" he asked brusquely. "It runs i' my mind 'at I've seen yer there of a mornin'."

The fish-man, whose cheeks bulged with bread-and-cheese, nodded.

"That's right, sir," he said, when he had made several swallows. "I was through there this morning. It's my first stopping-place, is Stoneby."

"Ye didn't happen to see aught o' that Pippany Webster?" asked Uscroft. "Ye know him—a sham-mockin' sort o' chap—I've seen you talkin' to him i' this kitchen."

The fish-man dropped his eyes and inclined his face towards the table at which he sat. He lifted his mug of ale, and hid most of his countenance with it. When he set it down he had collected his ideas. He would have been glad to have seen something of Pippany Webster, for since three o'clock on Monday morning, when Pippany should have met him with a supply of rabbits and had failed to do so, thereby causing him much inconvenience, he had been wondering where his recently-made business connection was. But his face was blank, and his eyes were innocent as he faced Uscroft and shook his head.

"No, I saw naught of no Websters," he answered. "I know the man you mean—slack-set sort o' chap,

as you say. What should he be doing over at Stoneby, Mister ? ”

“ Nay,” said Uscroft indifferently, “ it’s naught. Only I gave t’ man a job o’ thackin’ last week, and he’s never been near it neither yesterday or to-day, and a neighbour of his just said to me that he’d very like gone to Stoneby to see his rellytives ; and, as ye come through there, I thought ye might ha’ seen him there, in t’ street or in t’ public.”

“ No,” said the fish-man. “ I see naught of him at Stoneby, neither in street nor public-house.”

Uscroft glanced across to the other side of the kitchen and caught the gamekeeper’s eye.

“ I reckon ye’ve seen naught of him i’ yer peregrinations ? ” he said, with a sly movement of an eye-lid. “ Ye chaps is supposed to cover a deal o’ country.”

“ Not to look for such as him, sir,” answered the gamekeeper promptly. “ Something better to do than that, Mr. Uscroft.”

Uscroft turned and winked at the fish-man.

“ Why, I don’t know, keeper,” he said, with the half-sneering intonation of a man who wishes to tease another. “ I don’t know. I reckon yon Webster could snare a rabbit or two as well as anybody else. What do ye say, fish-seller ? ”

The fish-seller hastily drank what remained of his ale and rose, tightening the waistbelt of the blue-and-white apron which covered his trousers.

“ I’ve no doubt he could, mister ; I’ve no doubt he could,” he answered. “ Like a bit of nice fish leaving at your places, gentlemen, as I go by ? Fine piece of codfish this morning.”

Neither farmer nor gamekeeper made any response to this attempt to do business, and the fish-man accordingly retreated, and was presently heard voci-

ferating his wares as he drove his pony and cart up the street. Uscroft laughed.

"I'll lay yon man takes more nor a few o' rabbit skins out o' t' village, Justice," he said. "More rabbits nor what ye and us farmers shoots, what?"

"And I dare say you farmers give your men a rabbit or two now and then," retorted the gamekeeper.

Uscroft rubbed his chin.

"I don't," he answered. "But it so chanced 'at I were ridin' home down yon Spittle Lane one day, and I come across t' fish-seller yonder sortin' rabbit-skins on t' roadside, and it struck me 'at there must be a deal o' rabbits eaten i' Martinsthorpe. No doubt ye know more about that nor what I do."

The gamekeeper, a sturdy, black-bearded man of fifty, who had the reputation of caring much more for his ease than for rigorous carrying out of his duties, threw down the newspaper and picked up his gun.

"I don't tell everybody all that I know, Mr. Uscroft," he said, "There's such a thing as professional secrets, sir."

"Same as what lawyers talks about," sneered Uscroft. "Aye, I expect there is. It's a good term, is that. Professional secrets, say you?—aye, a good term."

The gamekeeper made no answer. He marched heavily out of the inn, with the lurcher following closely at his heels, and turned up the high-road which led away from the village in a southerly direction. Presently he passed through a gate, and began to cross the fields towards the eastward until he came to the brow of the hill beneath which lay Pippany Webster's isolated cottage, and the clusters of little houses which were gathered around the chapel. Then, lean-

ing over a fence, he lighted his pipe, and stared at the scene below him, thinking of what he had just heard. There was a strong vein of fussy inquisitiveness in his nature, and it was not long before he got over the fence and made his way behind protecting hedgerows to the cottage at which he had been gazing. And as he passed out of a gap in the hedge close to it he became aware of the presence of Mrs. Graddige, who was peering through the window with a manifest desire of seeing as much as possible of the interior.

Justice made a clicking sound with his tongue which caused Mrs. Graddige to leap hurriedly from an inverted flower-pot on which she had elevated herself. She uttered a sharp scream, and clapped a hand to her bosom.

"Massy on us, mestur, how ye did frighten me!" she exclaimed. "Ye've given me a real turn."

The gamekeeper laughed. Not a native of those parts, but from a southern county, he had a contempt for the Martinthorpe folk which he was unable to repress, and delighted in showing his superior wit.

"Thought it was the policeman, I expect, missis," he said, coming up to the window. "What 're you wanting to break into your neighbour's cottage for?"

"I'm none wantin' to break in nor to break off," retorted Tibby Graddige. "I've a better place o' mi own nor what this is, mestur. I were lookin' in to see if there's owt to be seen o' that poor man. He's missin', mestur—niver been to his work to-day nor yesterday, so Mestur Uscroft's been tellin' me, as came to seek him. An' after Mestur Uscroft had gone, it occurred to me 'at happen Webster had been ta'en wi' a fit o' appleplexy, or summat o' that sort, and were lyin' here helpless, d'ye see, mestur?"

Justice stepped on the flower-pot which Mrs. Graddige had so suddenly vacated, and looked through

the dirty, uncurtained window. By moving his head about from one pane to another he obtained a full view of the interior of Pippany Webster's living-room. On the table in the centre stood the crockery which Pippany had used for his Sunday afternoon tea ; in the rusty fire-grate were the grey-and-white ashes of the fire which had burnt itself out after his departure. Everything looked lost and desolate, and suggestive of something which the gamekeeper, a sharp-witted man, could not exactly define. He stepped down from the flower-pot and looked up at the bedroom window.

"There's nothing but that one room up there, missis, is there ? " he asked. "Or is there another at the back ? "

"No, there's naught but t' one sleepin' cha'mer," answered Mrs. Graddige, who was already under the influence of a delightful sense of mystery. "Eh, dear, mestur, what a dreadful thing it 'ud be if t' poor man wor lyin' on his bed theer, passed away ! "

The gamekeeper looked about the bit of garden in which they stood, hopeful of seeing some sort of a ladder lying beneath the fruit-trees or the hedgerows. Seeing nothing, he went round to the back of the cottage, Mrs. Graddige and the lurcher in close attendance. And then, casting an upward glance, he saw that there was a window at the back as well as at the front of the cottage, and that beneath it was a lean-to shed which formed a sort of scullery. He laid aside his gun.

"Now we can get a look in," he said, and began to climb to the roof of the lean-to. "We'll soon see if he's in there, missis, dead or alive."

While Mrs. Graddige watched and waited in breathless expectancy, the lurcher, relieved of attendance upon his master's heels began to inspect the

back-garden. He ran about here and there, sniffing and investigating, until he came to a small and ancient cucumber frame, half-hidden in a corner of the privet hedge. Most of the glass was gone, and what remained was broken ; within there appeared to be nothing but a pile of straw, upon which two or three old guano sacks were carelessly tossed. The lurcher, thrusting his scarred muzzle between the cracked panes of glass, changed his sniffing to a whine, and his whine to louder complainings.

" Nothing to be seen here," announced the game-keeper from the roof of the lean-to. " There's the bed, and it's made, in a fashion, but there's nothing either in or on or under it. No, nothing to see, missis, so—what's that dog up to ? "

The lurcher turned his disreputable head towards his master, lifted a paw, and complained more loudly than ever. Justice came slowly down, and went across to the cucumber frame, still followed by Mrs. Graddige. He, too, began to sniff. And, suddenly brushing the dog aside and lifting up the lid of the frame, he turned away the sacks and revealed, lying in rows upon the straw, the carcasses of a quantity of rabbits. The lurcher, unreprieved, thrust his nose into them : Justice and Tibby Graddige moved further back.

" Phew ! " exclaimed Justice. " I thought he smelled something. These must have been here a couple of days or more. Six—twelve—eighteen—two dozen of 'em. Poached, of course. Ah ! "

Mrs. Graddige, who had held her nose in the corner of her apron, released it.

" Well, did ye iver see the like o' that, mestur ! " she exclaimed. " The idea of a peaceable-behaved man like yon theer goin' out o' nights a-powchin' ! Eh, theer is a deal o' wickedness i' this world ! I

expect this'll be a lockin'-up job for him, mestur, weern't it? I suppose they can't hang him, same as they did i' t' good owd days, can they?"

The gamekeeper made no immediate reply. He had picked up a stick, and was turning the dead rabbits over, examining their feet, looking at the lighter coloured fur under their bodies. There was a good deal of soil on both fur and feet, and he knew at once from what particular part of the parish the rabbits had been brought.

"They'll very likely hang, draw and quarter him, missis," he answered. And, still using the stick, he replaced the sacks, and drove away the lurcher. "That is, if he's caught. Now, when did you see him last?"

"As I telled Mestur Uscroft, o' Sunday afternoon, when he were drinkin' his tea, which t' pot is still on t' table" replied Mrs. Graddige. "An' since then I've neither heard nor seen owt o' t' man. An' I'll tell you what I'm thinkin', mestur—if so be as he went out powchin' o' nights, which is what I should never ha' given him credit for, happen he's gotten hissen caught fast in a snare, or happen he's tumm'led down a hole in t' woods, and can't get away fro' neyther one nor t'other, and there he's starvin' to death, and him wi' nowt to eat sin' Sunday!"

Justice picked up his gun and moved off.

"You keep your mouth shut, missis," he said over his shoulder, as he went out of the garden. "Say nothing to anybody about these rabbits, nor about me, either. Or happen you'll get hanged, too, as an accomplice after the fact."

He went away, laughing, down the lane which led to the street. But as he returned to his house at the other end of the village, Justice thought seriously of what he had discovered and, knowing that the rab-

bits had come from the sandy-soiled retreats of Badger's Hollow, he determined on beginning an all-night vigil there that very evening. It appeared to him that Pippany Webster had probably some refuge in the woods, whereat he was finding it convenient to remain hidden for a day or two. And having a profound belief in his own cleverness and sagacity, Justice kept his knowledge to himself, and said nothing of his strangely-acquired information even to the policeman, and it was by himself, and unaccompanied by his dog, that he set out that night, by devious ways, to the lonely spot where Taffendale and Rhoda Perris were in the habit of keeping tryst.

XIII

WHOEVER, strange to the district, had come upon Taffendale's Limepits in the darkness of the night, might well have been excused if for the moment he had fancied himself dreaming of the bivouac which follows a long day's battle, when camp-fires are lighted, and spirals of smoke-stained flame wind upwards to a silent sky. Taffendale's Limepits were out of the world ; there was a high-road within a mile and a half of them and an occupation road which communicated with it ; there was also a railway near at hand, but the railway only touched the pits by a deep-sunk siding ; the occupation road was equally sunk between high banks and thick hedges ; the Limepits, unlike Taffendale's farm, which stood high on the uplands above, were hidden and unsuspected until you came to where the air, whether of a spring morning or a winter night, was always sharp with the acrid pungency of the burning lime. You perceived that pungency in your nostrils before

you came to Taffendale's ; however strong the scent of the new-mown hay in the adjacent meadows might be, however fragrant the freshness of the new-blown roses in the hedge, the clear, keen smell of the lime was paramount. Yet you saw nothing of this place until it suddenly showed itself at your feet ; then you found yourself confronting a great, wide-spread cavity in the surface of the land ; a sort of waterless lake sunk deep down beneath the level of the fields and woods, and all around its seamed and scarred sides the masses of limestone which men had forced out with pick or explosive, and in its midst conical heaps of the stone, built up symmetrically, like great beehives, with a bright fire glowing and crackling at the base of each, and from the apex a curling shaft of blue-grey smoke winding, day and night, while the lime burned, into the upper air.

This was Taffendale's Limepits—a little world in itself. To look more closely into its geography was to see that it had two hemispheres, like the greater world on whose surface it made so minute a speck. Men had delved and dug and scratched and burrowed into this quarry for so many generations that one-half of it had become exhausted ; the womb once so generous in gift could give no more. And in that half Nature had asserted herself in her usual fashion. The scarred sides had become covered over with shrub and plant and flower ; the burnt-out kilns had been transformed into mounds and knolls, whereon silver daisies and golden buttercups made stars in the grass ; the uneven floor of the quarry was no longer a wilderness of stone and rubble, but luxuriant enough of rye grass and clover to afford cropping-ground for a donkey here and a goat there. And here, in rudely-fashioned, one-storeyed cottages, built out of the stone, the lime-burners lived. This

worn-out, fully-worked scar, now given over to green things, was the barracks of the tiny army which ceaselessly tore wider and deeper scars into the unworked land beyond.

In the eyes of the folk who lived round about them in the neighbouring villages Taffendale's lime-burners were a strange lot. They were a people within a people. They kept themselves almost exclusively to themselves. There were not very many of them: some seven or eight families in all. As a rule they married amongst themselves; if a young lime-burner brought in a wife from outside she was a long time on approbation; whenever a young woman went away to service, or married one of the village lads (an unusual circumstance, seeing that villagers and lime-burners were always at variance), she left Taffendale's for ever. Now and then the men visited one or other of the inns and ale-houses in the district, or repaired to the market-town; on these occasions they went in a gang—no lime-burner was ever known to go on such an expedition by himself. And if they were aroused by villager or townsman at such times, they were more than quick to fight—and then it was ill work for the men who were adventurous enough to stand up to them. They were big, brawny, great-boned fellows, half-savage, wholly careless, good-looking in a devil-may-care fashion, and their isolated lives bound them as closely together as the ties of blood which were already theirs. And their women were of the same sort—fine, strapping, Amazon-like creatures, who had a wild beauty of their own, and were not unconscious of it, but were much prouder of the strength that enabled them, if it were necessary, to take a place alongside their men-folk with pick and shovel, or to wheel heavily-weighted barrows up the long planks which led to the newly-building kilns.

On the morning following Justice's visit to Badger's Hollow, Taffendale was standing on the edge of the quarry, watching his men build a new kiln. He was in something of a dour mood ; the entanglements with Rhoda Perris, into which he had fallen with a species of ease and inevitableness for which he could not account, was beginning to assume a certain seriousness which he did not care to face. On the previous evening Rhoda had told him that she could not understand Perris's conduct during the past two or three days. He had gone about his work in silence ; eaten his meals in silence ; had behaved as if he were indifferent to her comings and goings ; once or twice she had caught him looking at her as if he were thinking or speculating about her. That afternoon he had gone into the market-town to sell his new wheat ; he had not returned home when she set out in the evening to meet Taffendale. And she was vaguely suspicious that there was something wrong, she said ; maybe Perris had heard something ; maybe it was unsafe for them to meet. For the first time she had been afraid of the woods, dark and quiet and lonely though they were, and her sense of unseen trouble had communicated itself to Taffendale. He had gone home uneasy and dissatisfied, and had passed a restless night, and now as he stood looking down at his lime-burners, building the new kiln layer by layer, he was wishing in his mind that Perris's wife had never come near him for help, and more than all that he had never walked home with her on that warm spring night which had found her so excited and emotional and susceptible. He saw now how easily Fate, or Destiny, or mere Chance had changed the direction of three lives.

As Taffendale stood there, gloomily ruminating on these matters and wondering how they could be put

right, he heard a heavy step behind him, and looking round saw Justice coming in his direction, his slouched hat set at a rakish angle, his gun resting in the crook of his arm, his hands thrust negligently in the pockets of his cord breeches. Taffendale turned his head away after the first sharp glance, and then walked a few yards further along the edge of the quarry, as if to put some distance between himself and the gamekeeper. He had no liking for Justice ; he regarded him as a lazy fellow who traded on the fact that he served an absentee master ; he fancied him to be sly and designing and a busybody, and he never exchanged more than a nod with him. He was not pleased to see Justice about his property, but there was a right-of-way across the land at the lip of the quarry, and he could not object to his taking it. At the same time he knew of no obligation upon him to take any notice of the gamekeeper, and he walked slowly along, watching the operations beneath until he was some distance from the path. Then, to his astonishment, he found that Justice had left the path and was following him. Taffendale turned sharply, and stared at the intruder in cold surprise. Justice saw the coldness and the surprise, and smiled, as he took one hand out of his pocket and touched the brim of his slouched hat with a gesture which somehow insinuated a lack of respect.

" Good-morning, Mr. Taffendale," he said, with an attempt at ease which Taffendale inwardly cursed for his familiarity. " A fine autumn morning, sir."

" Good-morning," answered Taffendale. He had faced Justice by that time, and he continued to regard him with disfavour. " Do you want to speak to me ? " he asked.

Justice smiled again, and taking out his pipe from an inner pocket of his velveteen coat, made a show

of lighting it. Taffendale, keenly observant, noticed that his hands trembled a little.

"Well, that's the truth, I did, sir," replied Justice, with an assumption of frankness. "That's what I stepped across for, Mr. Taffendale."

"Well?" said Taffendale.

Justice threw away the match and blew out a cloud of smoke. He watched it float upward as if its gyrations were of vast interest.

"That's a queer business about this man Webster, Mr. Taffendale," he said suddenly.

Taffendale, who had again turned to the quarry, glanced sharply round. He had found Justice eyeing him narrowly.

"What about Webster?" he said.

"He's disappeared," replied Justice. "Never been seen since Sunday. And this is Wednesday. He's a good job of work, too, at Mr. Uscroft's. Thatching."

Taffendale again turned away.

"It's of no interest to me where Webster is or isn't," he said.

Justice coughed. The sound was intended to convey doubt.

"Well, maybe it isn't, but maybe it is, Mr. Taffendale," he remarked. "You see, sir, when there was a bit of inquiry as to Webster yesterday, I made it my business to take a look round the cottage and garden, and I found out that he's been poaching. I found two dozen rabbits in an old cucumber frame under some sacking."

Taffendale made no reply. But he was beginning to understand that Justice had not come up to the Limepits for nothing, and he was listening with a greater intentness than he would have cared to betray.

"Aye, two dozen rabbits!" the gamekeeper continued. "Now, I'm a bit of a hand at going into

details and forming conclusions, Mr. Taffendale, and when I'd looked those rabbits carefully over I knew where Webster had snared them. Those rabbits, sir, had come from Badger's Hollow, down there in the woods yonder."

Still Taffendale made no sign and no answer, and Justice, watching him closely, saw no flicker of eyelid or twitch of lip. But Taffendale in his heart knew what was coming.

"So last night," continued Justice, "last night, sir, I went to Badger's Hollow on the chance of seeing if Webster was lying hidden there, and had anybody in with him at this job. I was there a good while, sir. And—I didn't see Webster. But—I saw you, Mr. Taffendale."

Still Taffendale remained silent. But his right foot had begun to scrape the gravel at his feet, and he suddenly kicked a pebble out into the quarry, where it went rattling across the shelving limestone.

"And," said Justice, in a lower voice, "I saw Perris's wife."

In the silence that followed up there on the lip of the quarry the deadened sound of the picks and shovels at work deep down below seemed to come from some far-off world. Justice broke the silence by striking a match. And as the rasping sound died Taffendale turned on him in a deadly quiet fury that made the gamekeeper start back.

"Damn you!" said Taffendale through his closed teeth. "For less than you think I'd pitch you neck and crop into that quarry!"

Justice drew still further back. He cast a significant glance at his gun.

"No you wouldn't, Mr. Taffendale! No, you wouldn't!" he said quietly. "This gun's loaded, sir, and if you'd to offer me any violence I'd use

it. As you've spoken plain, I'll speak plain, too, Mr. Taffendale."

Taffendale thrust his hands in his pockets, to conceal the trembling that had come over them. He turned his back on the gamekeeper, and walked forward along the edge of the quarry. And Justice, with a smile on his face, refilled his pipe, and this time took his leisure about lighting it with steady hands. Taffendale came back at last, master of himself again. He looked at Justice with his usual cold air of distasteful inspection.

"Well, I suppose that's what you came to say?" he remarked.

"That's about all, Mr. Taffendale," answered the gamekeeper.

"About all?" sneered Taffendale. "I can guess the rest, Mr. Keeper. The rest is—how much am I going to give you to hold your tongue?"

Justice looked at the rich man sharply, and with a sudden feeling of uneasiness. Rich folk, he knew, are apt to be independent.

"Well, it wouldn't be a pleasant thing for you, Mr. Taffendale, if the truth came out," he said. "I reckon nothing of Perris—he's a poor, feckless sort, from what I've seen of him, and I should think he's inclined to submit to anything. But there's such a thing as public opinion, sir, and——"

"And there's such a thing as blackmail, and there's such a thing as law," said Taffendale. "You're hinting at one, and you're bringing yourself within reach of the other. Who was with you last night?" he demanded, turning sharply on Justice.

"Nobody, sir, nobody!" replied the gamekeeper, taken unawares. "Nobody at all, Mr. Taffendale."

Taffendale laughed.

"You're a fool!" he said. "Where're your

witnesses? You come here, and threaten me with a cock-and-bull story, and all for what? To get money out of me. Mind I don't put the police on to you, my man!"

Justice suddenly realised that he was dealing with a cleverer man than himself; that he had been too confident, that he had been too hasty. His countenance betrayed his disappointment.

"I know what I saw," he muttered sulkily.

Taffendale laughed again, showing his white teeth, and the gamekeeper was suddenly reminded of an animal that bares its fangs when it comes to a life-and-death fight. And as he laughed, he waved his hand in the direction of the village.

"Go down to the pot-house yonder in Martins-thorpe," said Taffendale severely, "and tell your cronies what's in your mind, and I'll have you in the hands of the police before a day's over. And now, then, get off my land!"

Justice stood for a moment looking uneasily at the man in whom he had thought to find an easy victim. Then he nodded his head, and turned off towards the path.

"All right, Mr. Taffendale," he said. "I see, sir! But there's more ways than one. And I don't think Badger's Hollow 'll see you and Mrs. Perris again."

Taffendale made no answer. He remained watching Justice until the gamekeeper had gone down the path and away towards the village. For half-an-hour longer he watched his men, and his eyes were dark and sombre with thought, and now and then he muttered his thoughts half-aloud. He was beginning to understand why Rhoda had felt some curious prevision of coming trouble.

He went slowly back to the farmstead as noon drew near, and just as he reached his garden gate he met

the young labourer whom Perris had hired when he discharged Pippany Webster. He held out to Taffendale a cheap envelope, which bore plentiful impressions of his own fingers.

"T' missis hes sent this 'ere letter," he said bluntly. "And shoo said wo'd you please to read it as soon as it were 'livered?"

XIV

TAFFENDALE took the cheap envelope from the lad without comment, and tearing it open, drew out a crumpled sheet of equally cheap notepaper, in the top left-hand corner of which a crude representation of a pansy was stamped. He remembered as he unfolded it that he had never seen Rhoda's handwriting; there was no surprise aroused in him when he saw that it resembled the caligraphy of a school-boy who has been taught nothing but formal and elementary penmanship. He stared at the two or three lines traced hurriedly across the front page.

"Will you please come here as soon as you can. I am afraid something is wrong."

Taffendale crushed the note in his hand, and turned to the lad, who was staring open-mouthed at the signs of well-to-do-ness which distinguished the lime-burner's house and garden.

"All right," he said curtly. "Tell Mrs. Perris I'll ride round presently—half-an-hour or so."

The messenger nodded his head, and set off by the path which led across the fields, and Taffendale went into the house. He was wondering what it was that had made Rhoda send for him; what she meant by her use of the term "wrong." Going to the sideboard in his parlour he poured out a glass of sherry, and sipped

it slowly as he stood ruminating on the events of the morning. First Justice and his blackmailing demand ; now this urgent message from Rhoda—it seemed strange, he thought, that they should come together. And yet there was, perhaps, nothing strange in it ; there had always been a consciousness in Taffendale's mind that he and Perris's wife had been skating on thin ice which might at any moment crack beneath them. And all this, he said to himself with a grim smile, might be the first sign of the crack.

Taffendale's farm-men were crossing the fold to the dinner awaiting them in the kitchen, and he threw open the window and bade one of them saddle his horse. He himself never dined until two o'clock ; he would have ample time to ride to Cherry-trees and back before his dinner-hour arrived, unless something unforeseen awaited him there. And again he fell to wondering why Rhoda had sent for him with such evidence of urgency.

There was nothing in the appearance of Cherry-trees, when Taffendale rode up to it a little while later, to show that anything unusual had happened. The lad who had been sent to fetch him was just turning in at the orchard gate as Taffendale came in sight of it ; he had evidently taken his time as he traversed the footpath way. At the sound of the horse's ringing feet he glanced round before vanishing into the house. Rhoda came out at once, and on seeing her, Taffendale drew rein. She hurried down the orchard to meet him, stopping at the very place where Tibby Graddige had stood when she called him to render assistance to Pippany Webster. Taffendale saw at once that she was alarmed and uneasy ; there was a sense of some unknown fear in her eyes, and she kept looking from him to the house.

"What is it ?" he asked, drawing his horse along-

side the hedge and bending from the saddle. "What's the matter?"

Rhoda, as with an effort, concentrated her attention upon him.

"It's Perris," she said in a low voice. "He's—gone."

"Gone!" exclaimed Taffendale. "Gone?"

Rhoda inclined her head and made no answer in words.

"You don't mean he's left home—run away?" asked Taffendale. "What is it you mean? Speak out!"

Rhoda nervously began breaking bits of twigs and leaves off the top of the low hedge behind which she stood. She looked at Taffendale as if she scarcely knew what to say.

"I'm—I'm frightened," she said at last. "There's something wrong, and I don't know what. He wasn't at home when I came in last night—he'd gone to town to sell that new wheat, you know. And—he never came home."

"Well, but that's not so extraordinary," said Taffendale. "There might be reasons."

Rhoda shook her head.

"No!" she said. "I know him. He'd have been home last night if—if there wasn't something wrong. But he didn't come—and there is."

The persistent harping upon this feature of the matter began to irritate Taffendale. He repressed an exclamation of impatience, and drew his horse closer to the hedge.

"But—what do you think is wrong?" he said. "You're thinking something, you know. What is it?"

Rhoda gazed full at him for a moment, and made no answer.

"Come, now!" he said insistently.

But she only shook her head again and continued to stare at him. Suddenly she broke into more voluble speech.

"And he never came back this morning," she said, "and then, just before noon, a man came with a wagon and horses, and said that Perris had sold the wheat yesterday to Mr. Mawson, and that he'd come to fetch it—he'd a written order for its delivery, had the man, signed by Perris, and he said he'd seen his master pay Perris for it. There were seventy quarters, and they agreed at thirty shillings a quarter."

"Hundred guineas," muttered Taffendale. "Well, has the man taken it?"

"No," replied Rhoda. "I asked him to wait until I'd seen you. He's put up his horses, and gone down to the Bear for an hour."

"Well, he'll have to take it," said Taffendale. "It's Perris's, and nobody can stop him from selling it. You say the man saw him paid?"

"Yes, Mr. Mawson paid him in cash," answered Rhoda. "But—that's not all. After—after the man had gone down to the Bear I bethought myself of the money I had put away. There was some left of what you lent, and there was some of my own, out of the fowls and such like, and there was some that Perris got last week for pigs. You see, he's been so steady, and all that of late, that I let him know where I kept the money, and he gave me whatever came in to put with it. It was in a secret drawer in that old bureau, in the parlour. And when I'd heard from Mr. Mawson's man about the wheat I went to look in the drawer, and the money was all gone. He must have taken it yesterday before he went off."

"How much was there?" asked Taffendale. He was beginning to see now that there was something out

of the common in all this ; and Perris was carrying some design into execution, and he grew vaguely fearful of what its meaning might be.

"How much ?" he repeated.

Rhoda hesitated as if she feared to answer. She was still nervously plucking at the twigs and leaves of the hedge, and alternately glancing from Taffendale to the house.

"I'm afraid it was a foolish thing to keep so much there," she said, at last. "We'd been talking about putting it in the bank only last Sunday."

"How much was there ?" asked Taffendale, impatiently.

"There was between fifty and sixty pounds," she answered.

Taffendale screwed up his lips.

"So that, if he has gone away, he's carried at least a hundred and fifty pounds with him," he said, presently. "Well—I'm afraid he's off. It looks like it—it looks very like it !"

Rhoda pushed herself forward over the top of the hedge. Her face flushed as Taffendale bent nearer to her.

"Mark !" she said. "Mark ! Do you think it's because—because he'd heard aught about—you and me ?"

Taffendale frowned. But when he remembered his interview with the gamekeeper that morning he felt that Rhoda's suggestion was probable.

"I don't know—I don't know !" he said hastily. "There's time enough to think about that. I'm afraid he's gone, though. I shouldn't have thought anything at all about his selling the wheat and being away for a day or two ; it's the taking of the money from the drawer that seems to settle it. He hasn't left a scrap of writing about, saying anything ?"

Rhoda shook her head.

"I never thought to look, but I'm sure he hasn't," she answered. "No, it's just what he would do, Perris, to go off in that quiet, sly way. He—here's the man coming back for the wheat."

At sight of Mawson's wagoner coming round the corner of the garden, Taffendale edged his horse away from the orchard fence and rode on to the gate.

"I'll speak to him," he said, over his shoulder. "Of course, he'll have to take it."

The wagoner, who knew Mr. Taffendale well enough, touched his cap as the limeburner rode up to him.

"Now, my lad," said Taffendale, pleasantly. "Mrs. Perris tells me you've come for that wheat. Mr. Perris isn't at home, but I suppose it's all right—you've got an order for delivery?"

The wagoner pulled out a scrap of paper.

"Aw, it's all reight, Mestur Taffendale, sir," he replied. "Here's t' order—I were there when our maister bowt t' wheat, and I see'd him pay Mestur Perris for it. And they 'greed that I should fetch it this mornin'."

"All right—all right," said Taffendale. He entered the little enclosure at the corner of the house, and having dismounted from his horse, tied it up to a tree. Going into the house-place he bade the young labourer finish his dinner quickly and go to help the wagoner. "That's all in order," he said to Rhoda when they were alone. "Of course, as I said just now, he'll have to take the wheat. That's settled. Now—is there anything to show that he meant to be off?"

"There's nothing," replied Rhoda, looking helplessly around her. "He just went out as he always did when he went to market—he'd his second-best

suit on, and it's not over new. You don't think——'

She paused, and looked at Taffendale with eyes in which he read some fear that had not come to full expression.

"Think—what?" he asked.

"Think that—that aught's happened to him?" she murmured.

"What could happen to him?" said Taffendale.

"Well, if he'd all that money on him," she said.

"He might have been followed, and——"

"Who knew that he'd all that money on him?" Taffendale retorted, with an impatient laugh. "No—he's gone. He'd planned it out. The thing is—where has he gone?"

Rhoda shook her head. She glanced around her and lowered her voice.

"That's not it, Mark," she said. "The real question is—why has he gone? He's—heard something."

Taffendale made a sound and a movement indicative of impatience and vexation.

"Supposing he had heard something, why should that make him go?" he exclaimed. "No, I tell you, he's planned it. I always considered him a deep and a sly customer, for all his softness. He's planned it all, and he's got a nice start and money in his pocket. And if he was deep enough to do that, he'll be deep enough to disappear altogether."

Rhoda darted a swift look at him.

"You think that?" she said quietly.

"If you're asking me what I think," answered Taffendale, "I'll tell you straight out, my girl—I think Perris has been sharp enough to get together all the money he could, and that he's probably off to Canada or New Zealand or—somewhere. That's what I think."

Again Rhoda gave him a swift glance.

"And—me?" she said.

Taffendale's face flushed, and he thrust his hands in his pockets and began to pace the room.

"Just so!" he said. "And—me. And—a good many other folks. It's no use trying to make light of it. There's going to be trouble, Rhoda. Or, rather, not going to be. It's here. And——"

Just then a man passed the window, stumping heavily over the cobbles. The sharp rap of a stick sounded on the door, which Taffendale had closed when the young labourer went out. As Taffendale stood near the door, he opened it, and found himself confronting a man whom he knew as a drover employed by one of the market-town butchers. The man grinned.

"Day, Mestur Taffendale, sir," he said, lifting his stick to his cap. "Anybody at home here, sir?"

Taffendale made no answer. He beckoned Rhoda to the door, and the man again touched his cap.

"Day, mum," he said. "I come for them two bullocks 'at Mestur Perris selled to our gaffer, yesterday. Here's t' order for 'livery.'"

Rhoda took the greasy scrap of paper, and stared at Perris's handwriting as if she scarcely comprehended its meaning.

"He said, did Mestur Perris, 'at he mightn't be at home this afternoon," continued the drover, "so I were to show that bit o' writin' to eyther you or t' lad, mum. I know t' bullocks when I see 'em, mum."

Rhoda glanced at Taffendale. Taffendale nodded.

"Very well," she said to the man. "You'll find them in the fold."

Taffendale followed the drover down the yard.

"How much did your master give Mr. Perris apiece for these bullocks, Tom?" he asked with

affected carelessness. "I've got a few to sell if prices are decent."

"He gev' sixteen-ten for one, and fifteen for t'other, sir," answered the drover. Then he laughed softly. "But yeer stock's a bit diff'rent fro' what this is, Mestur Taffendale," he said, slyly. "This is nobbut poor stuff, sir."

Taffendale went back to the house, where Rhoda still stood staring about her as if she neither saw nor understood anything.

"That's another thirty pounds he's got with him," he said, with a harsh laugh. "So he's gone off with nearly two hundred capital. And—and I don't see what's to stop him."

"He found something out," said Rhoda. "He found something out. I'm sure that was it. He found something out!"

Taffendale made no answer, and Rhoda presently turned to the window, and leaning over the sill looked over the flower-pots into the fold without. The wagoner was carrying away the wheat out of one gate, and the drover was driving off the bullocks from another.

XV

JUSTICE went away from the Limepits with a determination to hold his tongue. He would bide his time. He had made a mistake: he had been over-hasty. But he would wait; he would watch. He had more than an ordinary share of common-sense, and he believed that he would win more in the end by waiting than by making a hurried attack. He walked home thinking over his future plans: there was a friend of his, a sharp-witted attorney's clerk, in the market-town, whom he would consult; they

would put their heads together over this affair, with a view to the utter confounding of Mr. Mark Taffendale. In the meantime he would not say a word of what he knew to any man or woman in Martinsthorpe; he would preserve such a silence as he was rarely accustomed to keep. But when the gamekeeper went down to the Dancing Bear that evening for his nightly recreation, he speedily became aware that there was something afoot. At the cross-roads, in front of the inn, the groups of men and lads which congregated there when the day's work was over were obviously moved and excited by unusual news; a buzz and cackle of gossip hovered round and ran from one to the other. The young labourer who had replaced Pippany Webster had known no reason for keeping his tongue quiet, and he had talked freely since his return to the village from the scene of his labours.

Justice stopped a man who was slouching across the open space to the back-door of the inn.

"What's the matter, Jack—what're they talking about?" he asked.

The man shrugged his shoulders and laughed.

"Nay, they say 'at Perris, yonder, up at t' Cherry-trees, has run away," he answered. "Bill Tatten, him 'at works theer since Pippany wor' turned away, browt t' news. Sold all t' stuff offen t' place, and seemin'ly ta'en his departure, as it wor."

Justice said nothing in reply to this, and the informant, finding him silent, passed on to the kitchen wherein those labourers who had twopence to spend congregated around the deal tables. The gamekeeper wanted time to think before joining his own coterie. He began to wish more ardently than ever that he had not been in such haste to wait upon Mr. Taffendale that morning. And before he went into the Dancing Bear out of the darkness which was fast

stealing over the village, he had resolved to know nothing and to have heard no more than what had just been told him.

In a certain room of the inn, between parlour and kitchen, the room in which Perris and his companions had made merry on the rent-day, a select assemblage of the Martinsthorpe men met every evening. At that hour of the day the kitchen was given up to the labourers; the parlour was reserved to one or two of the better class of farmers, and to folk who chanced to be riding or driving along the high-road. In the intermediate room assembled the blacksmith, the carpenter, the miller, and the farmers of Perris's standing; with these the gamekeeper, at first received with some reserve and shyness because of his south country origin and vastly different speech, had finally made himself at home through his habits of good-fellowship and his ability to tell a good tale and sing a good song. There were four or five of the usual fraternity there when he walked in on this occasion, and he saw at once they were discussing Perris's disappearance as eagerly as the men and lads outside. Justice, not wishing to show himself entirely ignorant, threw out a question as he dropped into his accustomed seat.

"What's all this about Perris, gentlemen?" he asked. "I just heard that he's made himself what the Latin scholars term *non est*; which means that he isn't where he should be—at home."

The blacksmith, who by virtue of seniority occupied the best seat by the fire, took his churchwarden pipe out of his mouth and spat into the glowing coals.

"Ne'er mind what t' Latin scholars says, nor t' Greek scholars, neyther," he observed. "I know what t' English on it is. Happen I heerd summat about it before onnybody i' Martinsthorpe."

"Well, what?" asked Justice, leisurely filling his pipe.

"I were i' t' kitchen theer hevin' a glass when yon man o' Mestur Mawson's come in for a bit o' bread-and-cheese," continued the blacksmith. "An' sits hissen down at t' side o' me. An' he says, says he, 'I think theer's summat queer up yonder at t' Cherry-trees,' he says. 'How so?' says I. 'Why,' he says, 'Perris, he sell'd our maister his new wheat yesterda', and it wor settled 'at I should fetch it to-day,' he says, 'and when I got theer just now,' he says, 'Perris worn't theer, and his wife knew nowt about it, and I made out 'at she's niver set ees on him sin' yesterda', he says. 'An' she wodn't let me tak' t' wheat till she'd sent for Mestur Taffendale to tak' his counsel on t' matter.' 'Did yeer maister pay for t' wheat?' says I. 'Aye, he did, an' i' my presence, over a hundred pound,' he says, 'an' I hev Perris's orders for t' delivery i' case he worn't at home, an' here it is,' he says, showin' t' bit o' paper. 'Why, then, ye're all reight,' I says, 'whatever Taffendale counsels or doesn't counsel.'"

"Aye, it's reight, is that," observed the carpenter, with an air of great wisdom. "So long as Mestur Mawson hed paid for t' stuff, his man hed a reight to fetch it."

"An' did Taffendale come to t' Cherry-trees then?" asked the miller. "An' what hed he to do wi' it, when all's said an' done? I niver heerd 'at t' Perrises wor owt to Taffendale."

The blacksmith again spat into the fire and wagged his head.

"Now, then, ye wait a bit!" he said. "I hev'n't tell'd all t' tale yet. That's nobbut t' first chapter, like. I heerd what happened when Mestur Mawson's man went back to t' Cherry-trees. Taffendale was

there, talkin' to t' wife ower t' orchard hedge. An', of course, theer wor nowt to be said—t' man wor in his reights to carry t' wheat away wi' him, and so Taffendale said. An' while he wor agate, this here man o' Mestur Mawson's, gettin' t' wheat out o' t' granary, wi' yon theer Bill Tatten to help him, up comes a chap to drive off two young beasts, bullocks, 'at he said Perris hed selled to his gaffer, Claybourne, t' butcher, t' day afore. An' they hed to go an' all, 'cos they'd been duly settled for. So Perris wor none wi'out brass i' his pocket, wheeriver he's gone. An' that's t' reight truth about t' tale, 'cos I hed it all fro' Bill Tatten hissen—he come into my place wi' a brokken ploo-share as he wor goin' home to-neet, and he telled me all about it. An' he said 'at Taffendale an' Perris's wife wor talkin' i' t' house for hours 'at after t' men had gone away wi' t' wheat and t' bullocks."

In the silence which followed this deliverance, Justice rang the bell and ordered a glass of whisky.

"I expect Mrs. Perris sent for Mr. Taffendale because he's their nearest neighbour," he observed, when the whisky had been brought and the door closed again upon the conclave. "His place isn't so far off theirs."

The blacksmith snorted, and gave Justice a look expressive of North Country contempt for South Country inability to see through brick walls.

"Ah!" he said. "Du yer? Well, I expect nowt o' t' sort. I can see a bit further nor t' end o' mi nose, I can!"

"Well, and what do you see?" asked Justice, taking his snub good-humouredly. "Let's be knowin'."

The blacksmith leaned forward and looked slyly round the circle of expectant faces.

"I know nowt!" he said. "But I'll tell yer what I think. I think 'at Taffendale's been helpin' them theer! That's what I think. Helpin' 'em, I say."

"What, wi' brass?" exclaimed the miller. "Wi' brass?"

"Wi' brass! What else should he help em' wi'?" replied the blacksmith. "Now, ye look here. Theer's more nor one i' Martinsthorpe knows how it wor wi' Perris just afore t' last rent-day. Them as iver looked ower a hedge-top at t' Cherry-trees knows 'at he'd scarce owt left on t' place. And only two days afore t' rent-day itself, yon theer Pippany Webster browt a hoss to be shod at my place, and he tell'd me 'at theer worn't more nor one feed left for t' horses and t' pigs, and nowt much beside, and at' so far as he could see, Perris wor on his varry last legs for brass. And yit, on t' rent-day, down comes Perris as large as life, and pays up as if he wor a millionaire! Ye see'd him, all on yer."

"Aye, it's reight, is that," murmured the conclave in unanimous chorus. "He 'livered his brass up, reight enough, did t' man."

The blacksmith thumped the table.

"Aye, but wheer did 'a get t' brass!" he demanded. "Now, I'll tell yer summat 'at'll happen oppen yer ees! Yon theer dowter o' mine, Lucilla, wor i' Mestur Taffendale's sarvice at that time, and a neet or two afore t' rent-day, she heerd som'dy knock loud at t' front-door, when her and t' housekeeper, and t' other sarvent lass had gone to bed. And she thowt to hersen 'at it were a queer time o' night for onnybody to call. Howsomiver, she heerd Taffendale go and open t' door and she heerd him let som'dy in, and after some time she heerd him let som'dy out, and she looked out o' t' cha'mer window, did our Lucilla, and then she see'd—'cause t' parlour lamp and t' hall lamp shone

full on 'em—who'd yer think she see'd walkin' down t' garden path wi' Taffendale ? ”

The conclave shook its collective head in wondering silence, and the blacksmith wagged his own in triumph. He again thumped the table, and bent forward to smile more knowingly.

“ It wor Perris's wife ! ” he said. “ Perris's wife ! Ye mind that theer. Perris's wife ! ”

The company sighed deeply. Nobody seemed inclined to speak. But Justice presently found his voice.

“ It's a bit dangerous, saying things like that, isn't it ? ” he said. “ I mean—in a public way ? ”

The blacksmith turned on his commentator with scorn.

“ Dangerous ! What's dangerous ? ” he demanded. “ Theer's nowt dangerous about speykin' t' truth, is there ?—we don't reckon it so i' Yorkshire, onnyway, whativer ye South Country folk may do ! We speyk t' truth, and shame t' Devil—that's what we do, keeper, an' ye tak' a bit o' notice. My dowter's free to say what she saw wi' her own ees, isn't she ? I tell yer 'at she see'd Perris wife i' Taffendale garden that neet, and she'd been hafe-an-hour alone wi' him i' t' parlour. An' that my dowter 'll stand to, if need be. So theer ! ”

“ Shoo's a truthful young woman, is Lucilla,” observed the carpenter, with great solemnity. “ Shoo wodn't say nowt 'at worn't reight.”

“ Noe ! ” said Lucilla's father stoutly. “ If I found onny dowter o' mine sayin' owt 'at worn't reight, I'd gi' her bell-tinker wi' my strap ! Of course, shoo said what wor reight. An' that worn't t' only time 'at Perris's wife wor theer at t' Limepits late at neet, 'cause she wor theer agen a piece after, and our Lucilla see'd Taffendale go out wi' her, and he

didn't come home for two hours that neet, and then it wor after twelve o'clock when he did come home. An' if ye ax me, I say 'at Taffendale's been helpin' them theer wi' brass, and I could like to know what's he's hed i' exchange for it—now then ! ”

Justice's sly spirit was rejoicing with him. A little more talk of this sort in the village, a little more frank, and brutal, and eminently Yorkshire expression of opinion, and Taffendale would find a hornets' nest about his ears. Even if he, Justice, gained nothing by it himself in a pecuniary sense, he would have the gratification of knowing that he was revenged for the coldness and insolence with which Mr. Taffendale of the Limepits had always treated him. So he drank his whisky and smoked his pipe, and for once played the part of quiet listener.

“ All t' same,” observed the miller, after a pause, “ all t' same, I don't see what all that's gotten to do wi' this sudden disappearance o' Perris's.”

“ Don't yer ? ” said the blacksmith. “ Happen yer don't. But ye wait a bit, mi lad. Theer's summat 'll come out. A man doesn't lig his hands on all t' brass he can sam up, and then tak' hissen off wi'out a word to onnybody, unless he's some reason. Ye mind that.”

One of the small farmers, who had steadily consumed cold gin, and preserved an attentive silence while the blacksmith talked, now broke in upon the discussion, prefacing his remarks with a sly smile.

“ Why it seems a varry queer thing to me, gentlemen, 'at Perris an' yon theer Pippany Webster should ha' disappeared 'at about t' same time,” he observed. “ Theer is, of course, what they terms coincidences, but I niver heerd tell o' one occurin' i' a little out-o'-t'-way place like Martinsthorpe before.”

“ Didn't yer ? ” grunted the blacksmith contempt-

uously. "A'but, them things occurs onny wheer. T' size o' t' place hes nowt to do wi' it. An' I don't believe 'at it is onny coincidence, as t' term goes, i' this case. It's my opinion theer's a plot o' some sort—a consperracy."

The miller started.

"What, summat like t' Gunpowder Plot!" he exclaimed. "Ye wodn't go so far as to say it resembled that theer?"

"Niver ye mind," said the blacksmith. "Ye'll see 'at we're nobbut at t' beginnin' o' this here mystery."

"That's t' reight word," said the carpenter. "Aye, it's indeed t' reight word, is that theer. Mystery! That's t' reight word, gentlemen—Mystery!"

To make some endeavour to solve the mystery, there presently appeared at Cherry-trees John William Perris, to whom Rhoda had written asking if he had any news of Abel. He arrived in the mourning garments which he had put on in the expectation of hearing that his Uncle George had left him at least a thousand pounds, and his countenance was doleful and perplexed. And after he had spent an hour with Rhoda, who had taken Tibby Graddige into her house to keep her company, he walked across to the Limepits to call upon Taffendale. Taffendale chanced to meet him outside and took him into the parlour and gave him spiritual refreshment, inwardly wondering if it would be possible to find anywhere in the world two brothers who looked so slackly set up and so obviously unfit as Abel and John William Perris. He offered John William a cigar, and left him to open the conversation.

"I'm sore put to it to understand how it is that my poor brother's disappeared like this here, Mr. Taffendale, sir," said John William Perris. "Us

Perrises has always been a very straight-livin' lot, sir, ever since I can remember, and by all I can gather o' what happened to us i' previous ages. It's a very surprisin' matter, sir, is this here. Of course, I understand, Mr. Taffendale, that you've been uncommon good to 'em, and that Abel was beginnin' to prosper a bit, thanks to you, and it makes it all the more unaccountable, as it were. How would you be for reckonin' of it up, sir ? "

" I'm not for reckoning it up at all," answered Taffendale. " The facts are plain enough. Your brother realised as much money as he could on what he had to sell, and off he went with the money. That's the long and the short of it."

John William Perris rubbed his sandy stubble which grew on his weak chin with the tip of a black-gloved finger.

" Yes, I expect that's the long and the short of it, sir," he said. " You couldn't put it no straighter, Mr. Taffendale. But—what's to become of Abel's wife, sir ? "

Taffendale made no answer.

" Because, you see, Mr. Taffendale, things can't bide as they are," continued John William. They'll develop, as it were, in some way."

Taffendale was as well aware of that fact as his visitor, and when he had gone he repeated the phrase to himself, and cursed the evil of unfortunate circumstances, which was growing tighter and stronger. He felt that there was trouble in the air. But he knew nothing definite, until an old farmer from Martins-thorpe drew him aside one day in the market-town.

" Mark," he said, " I'm afraid there's going to be unpleasantness for you. Do you know what they're saying ? "

Taffendale turned on him in a fury of irritation.

"Saying? Who's saying?" he exclaimed.
 "What're they saying?"

"They're saying that you and Perris's wife were carrying on before he went off, and that that's why he went off," said the old man, eyeing him steadily. "It's all over the village."

Taffendale turned white with anger.

"Damn them!—let them talk!" he said. "Do you think I care what Martinsthorpe folk say? Let them talk!"

But as he went down the market-place he caught sight of Justice, as he walked across and confronted him.

"Now, then, you!" he said, with concentrated fury in his tone. "You've been talking. I warned you I'd break you if you talked. You've been talking, I say, damn you!"

Justice drew himself up and looked the lime-burner squarely in the face.

"I've never opened my lips on the matter, Mr. Taffendale," he said. "There was no need, sir. I found out that others knew more than I did."

And he passed on, leaving Taffendale more furious than ever.

XVI

WHEN the gamekeeper had remarked to Taffendale at their meeting on the lip of the quarry that there was such a thing as public opinion, Taffendale had laughed scornfully. Public opinion, as represented by the ideas and feelings of Martinsthorpe, was naught to him. He was not of the Martinsthorpe community: he never mixed with even the better sort of its members,

except on the half-yearly rent-day. Leaving out two or three of the principal farmers he could buy up the whole of Martinsthorpe with ease. He had no Martinsthorpe folk in his employ ; his lime-burners were a separate and peculiar race ; his farm-labourers, who all lived in his house, were invariably engaged by him at distant statute-hiring fairs. Between the people of Martinsthorpe and himself there had always been a gulf. He never went to church ; never attended any parish meeting or social gathering ; never identified himself with the village in any way. And when he heard Justice's veiled hint he said to himself that he was not going to begin the practice of regarding the public opinion of Martinsthorpe. Let its people think what they liked, and say what they thought : he cared not.

Nevertheless, early on the morning following his meeting with the old farmer in the market-town, Taffendale, white-hot with temper and rage, rode his horse into the cobble-paved yard which lay in front of the blacksmith's forge, and called loudly to the two apprentices for their master. The blacksmith, just then eating his breakfast in his cottage beyond the forge, heard the loud and insistent voice, and emerged from his porch, calmly wiping his lips with the back of his hand. He leaned over his garden gate, and stared Taffendale hard and full in the face.

" Mornin', Mestur Taffendale," he said quietly.

Taffendale glared angrily at the blacksmith from between the ears of his panting horse.

" Now, then," he said, not condescending to any greeting or preface, " what were you saying about me at the Dancing Bear the other night ? "

" Nowt but what's true," retorted the blacksmith.

Taffendale set his teeth, and with a touch of his spur urged the horse a yard or two nearer.

"Damn you!" he said. "Do you know there's such a thing as law in this country?"

"Aye, I do!" said the blacksmith. "An' what bi' that?"

"You'll find yourself in its clutches if you don't mind what you're doing!" replied Taffendale threateningly. "And your daughter, too. Do you hear what I say?"

"Aye, I do hear what ye say, and I don't care one o' them damns 'at ye're so fond o' throwin' about for what ye say," answered the blacksmith stoutly. "An' I'll tell ye to your face, Mestur Taffendale, what I said at t' Dancin' Bear. I said 'at when my dowter Lucilla wor in your service she were made aware 'at Perris's wife visited you late at night on two occasions, and were alone wi' you in your parlour, and 'at on one occasion ye went out wi' her and wor away fro' your house for over two hour. And that's t' truth, Mestur Taffendale, and ye knows it's t' truth, and it can be proved. An' ye can ride into t' town and tak' t' law o' me as much as ye like. I know who's t' most to lose. I don't carry on wi' other men's wives, onny-way."

Taffendale stared at the man who could show such bold defiance. The isolated and lonely life which he lived had given him something of an exaggerated sense of his own importance, and he was puzzled to find that the blacksmith did not offer to eat humble pie at the mere sight of him. He whipped his horse round.

"You'll get no more trade from me," he said. "Send in your bill for aught that's owing."

The blacksmith laughed, and drawing himself erect, tightened the strings of his leather apron.

"I'm none dependent on ye'er bit o' wark, mestur," he said. "Ye seem to think 'at theer's nobody but

9x9 31
Taffendale

yersen i' Martinsthorpe. Mind 'at ye don't find out 'at theer is som'dy else ! If I were ye, I should be ashamed to show misen i' t' place."

Out of sheer bravado and contrariety, Taffendale rode boldly through the village street. At the cross-roads there was the usual group of loafers ; its members stared blankly at him, and the cripple to whom he sometimes gave a shilling made no offer to touch his ragged cap. The women at the cottage doors glanced at him curiously and made no sign, but twice, as he rode along, he heard stifled bursts of laughter break out behind him. He met one or two of the Martinsthorpe farmers ; they passed him with no more than a nod : coldness and aloofness were in their eyes. Taffendale set his lips and sneered.

" Damn 'em, let 'em think and say and do what they like ! " he muttered. " What does it matter to me ? "

That it mattered to anybody else had not yet entered into Taffendale's comprehension. That it did, never dawned upon him until a few days later, when, amongst his morning's budget of letters, he found a rude scrawl which made him knit his brows. It was hurriedly written across a sheet of the whitey-brown paper in which village shopkeepers wrap small wares, and the penmanship was elementary. Taffendale read it twice over, while he read cursing the hint that it conveyed.

" Dear sir," it ran, " you had best to get yon woman away from Perris's place before too late because there is going to be trouble so no more from A WELL-WISHER."

Taffendale threw the letter into the fire with a further hearty curse. But when he had breakfasted he mounted his horse and rode round to Cherry-trees.

He had kept away from the place as much as possible since Perris's disappearance, and when he had called there it had been only to talk to Rhoda over the gate of the orchard, where they were in full view of Tibby Graddige from the house and of anybody who happened to be passing along the road. She came out to him now, careworn and haggard with the uncertainty and anxiety which had so unexpectedly come upon her. And Taffendale, suddenly observant of the dark shadows under her eyes, and the nervous turn of her head, was for the first time minded not to curse other folks, but to utter a malediction on himself.

"You haven't heard anything?" she said, as she came up to the gate. "I thought, perhaps, you had when I saw you coming along the lane."

"No, I've heard nothing," he answered. "I don't think we shall hear anything. Look here, Rhoda, I've been thinking——"

He paused as if at a loss for words, and Rhoda looked up at him as if she had some intuition as to what was coming.

"Don't you think you'd better go away for a while?" he said. "I don't believe Perris'll ever come back, and things can't go on like this. Go away—close the house, and let me get affairs settled up. I'll write to the steward. It's the best thing to do."

Rhoda bowed her head for a moment. When she lifted it again he was surprised to see that her expression was acquiescent. The old, stubborn spirit seemed to have been driven out of her.

"Very well," she said. "I'll go. I shall be glad to go. I know what they're saying down in the village. And—and last night I got a letter from the chapel people saying that I'm not to sing in the choir again, though they say I can attend the chapel if I choose. It's likely I should do that!"

"Damn them for a set of canting hypocrites!" snarled Taffendale. "It's like 'em! Ready to judge and condemn when they've only heard half a tale."

Rhoda looked up again.

"But I don't know where to go," she said. "I won't go to my father and mother—not for anything! Nor to John William's. Where can I go?"

Taffendale thought quickly. And he thought of the wrong thing.

"You shall go to the seaside for a while," he said. "I—I could run over and see you. Listen, because we must settle at once. Tell Tibby Graddige you won't want her after to-night, and pay off that lad this afternoon. Pack your box and have all ready for eight o'clock to-morrow morning. I'll order a cab to be here, for you, and you can drive to Somerleigh. Go to Cornchester, and book from there to—where? Anywhere will do—anywhere that's quiet. Say Filey. Write to me from there when you've found a lodging. And, look here, I've some notes in my pocket that you'd better take. There's thirty pounds. And here's some gold to pay off the woman and the lad. It's the only thing to do, Rhoda. Get away."

"Very well," she answered, taking the money which Taffendale crumpled up in a careless handful and passed across the gate. "I'll do what you wish. I'm getting nervous about being here. I'll go—yes, to-morrow morning."

"To-morrow morning at eight a cab will be here," said Taffendale. He looked at her as if there was more to be said, yet he said nothing. "I'll—I'll be sure to see you within a week," he added. "Write when you get there."

Rhoda inclined her head, but made no answer,

and Taffendale turned his horse round and rode back to the Limepits. After all, he said to himself, it was best that Rhoda should go away. There was nothing to be done; Perris had disappeared as completely as if the grave had swallowed him, and nobody believed that he would ever return. Perhaps with Rhoda gone the feeling in the village would die down; certainly there was no need that she should ever return to the Cherry-trees. As to the future, Taffendale did not then concern himself with it. Nor did he again think of the anonymous letter which had warned him of some nebulous eventuality.

Since Perris's flight Rhoda, at Taffendale's instigation, had kept Tibby Graddige constantly with her. Tibby, well paid for her services, had accepted the post of companion with equanimity. There had been little to do, and plenty to eat, and all that she missed was the village gossip. She had tried to wheedle as much news as she could get out of Bill Tatten, but there had always been an uneasy conviction in her mind that Bill Tatten was not telling her all that he knew. Nevertheless, he tried to extract news from Tibby herself before he left the Cherry-trees on the evening of his dismissal. Tibby had left the house to feed the fowls, and Mr. Tatten, fingering in his breeches-pockets the money which Rhoda had paid him in lieu of notice, and further conscious of the fact that she had made him a present of ten shillings out of pure goodwill, waylaid her at the gate of the fold and showed a disposition to converse.

"Is Mistress Perris aimin' to go away i' t' mornin'?" he asked, gazing at Mrs. Graddige with an expression which implied his assurance of her complete knowledge of Rhoda's movements. "Is she?"

"What for do ye want to know what Mistress

Perris is goin' to do ? " said Tibby Graddige. " It's nowt to ye."

" Happen not," replied Mr. Tatten. " An' happen it is. An' I reckon shoo is goin', cause I noticed 'at ye an' her ha' been gettin' her clothes ready, and 'at shoo wor packin' things i' a box."

" Well, I say it's nowt to ye," repeated Tibby Graddige. " An' nowt to nobody. If Mistress Perris thinks well an' good t' go a-visitin' her rellytives, theer's nobody can say owt agen it, can they ? "

" Aw, it's reight enough, is that theer," replied Mr. Tatten. " Shoo's a reight to go wheer shoo pleases, hes t' woman. Theer's no law agen it, 'at I know on. So shoo's off i' t' mornin'—what ? "

" I say it's nowt to ye when she's off nor when she isn't off," answered Tibby. " Ye've gotten yer brass, and summat ower and above, 'cause I see'd t' young missis gi' it t' yer, and ye've hed yer supper an' all, and yer pint o' ale, so off yer go home, for I'm sure ye've been well done to, Bill Tatten."

" All reight," said Mr. Tatten. " I'm goin'. All t' same, I reckon 'at Mistress Perris is aimin' to be away to-morrow mornin'."

And instead of going straight to his own home in the lower part of the village, he went across the fields to a certain nook and corner behind the church, where, in a cottage tenanted by one Sal Bennett, the door of which was open to callers when that of the Dancing Bear was closed, and wherein many gallons of ale were consumed at hours when they could not be obtained on licensed premises, all the mischief of the village was concocted and all the best gossip and scandal discussed amongst a certain section of the baser sort.

Sal Bennett's only occupation in life, beyond that of wife to her husband, a meek and inoffensive old

shepherd, who always retired to bed before the nightly orgies which were carried on in his cottage began, was the making of toffee, which she rolled up in long sticks of the thickness of the stem of a churchwarden pipe, and sold, carefully wrapped in fancy paper with a twirl at the end, to the children at the price of a halfpenny a stick or three sticks for a penny. She was engaged in the manufacture of this confection when Mr. Tatten entered the cottage, and she turned a crimsoned face upon him from the glowing fire whereon lay a frying-pan in which the ingredients of the toffee were fizzling and spitting. She was a gaunt and formidable female, and she ruled her satellites with an influence which none of them understood, though all felt it.

"Now then, what do ye want?" demanded Sal Bennett, regarding the visitor speculatively. "Hes owt happened, or what?"

"I cam' here afore I went home," Mr. Tatten said, in explanation of his presence. "If so be as ye're goin' to carry out what it were decided to do, like, up yonder at t' Cherry-trees and t' Linnepits, ye'll hev' to do it to-neet. 'Cause I've fun' out 'at shoo's off first thing t'-morrow mornin', is t' woman."

Sal Bennett took her iron spoon out of the frying-pan, and, planting her great hands on her hips, looked Mr. Tatten searchingly in the face.

"Is that reight?" she asked. "Ha' yer made sure?"

"I'm as sure as I am 'at I see ye," answered Mr. Tatten. "Her and Tibby Graddige hes been gettin' her clothes ready all t'-day, and I see'd her packin' her box misen, and I gathered 'at shoo's goin' away to stop wi' rellytives, and shoo's paid me off, and g'ien me ten shillin' for misen, so theer. If it's goin' t' be done, it'll hev' to be done to-neet."

"Why, now, then!" said Sal Bennett. "It shall be done, reight enough. We'm all ready. T' images is already made, and they're in our shed at t' back theer, and theer's nowt to do now but to tell t' lads and them 'at's goin' t' tak' part. Ye mun go round, Bill, and give 'em t' word to be here as soon as t' darkness sets in. And tell 'em to bring as many owd cans and pans and tea-trays, and owt o' that sort as iver they can lay fingers to—it's no use wi'out theer's plenty o' noise."

"All reight," said Mr. Tatten. "I'll round 'em up. It's a rare good job 'at I fun' out shoo wor goin' i' t' mornin'."

"Well, as I say, all's ready," said Mrs. Bennett. "An' we'll gi' mi lady an' her fancy man summat to mak' 'em bethink theirsens."

When the darkness came on that night Rhoda and Tibby Graddige had just finished the labours of the day and were sitting down to supper. They had been ironing most of the afternoon, and the house-place was so hot from the bright fire which they had found it necessary to keep up that Rhoda had opened both door and window. Outside the house the night was very still, but a gentle wind was springing up from the south-west. And as it stole in, soft and warm, through window and door, it suddenly brought with it a strange and discordant sound which increased in volume with every passing second. It was a sound that seemed to be made up of various incongruous elements—the shouting of human beings, maddened or frenzied, the blowing of horns, the thumping of a drum, the beating of metal surfaces. And underneath and around it was the tramp of human feet.

Tibby Graddige, knowing old country woman that she was, was quick to hear and understand the first

murmur of the approaching storm, and rose to her feet, white and trembling.

"Oh, missis, missis!" she gasped. "Oh, missis!"

"What is it?" exclaimed Rhoda, rising just as hastily and upsetting the tea-pot which she was about to handle. "Tibby! What is it?"

Tibby Graddige listened for one brief second. The blare and the babel sounded more clearly with the next puff of wind. She gazed at Rhoda with horror-filled eyes.

"It's the stang!" she whispered hoarsely. "they're ridin' the stang for you and Taffendale. Eh, good Lord, what mun we do?—two helpless women! I heerd—I heerd a rumour 'at they would, but I never thought they'd do it: it's a good twenty year sin' it were ridden i' Martinsthorpe. Lord, ha' mercy on us!"

Rhoda scarcely comprehended the woman's meaning. But before she had time to speak Tibby Graddige clutched her by the wrist and dragged her up the stairs to a window which looked out upon the high-road. She pointed a finger to the vengeance which was coming, hydra-headed and brutal, through the night.

Rhoda looked fearfully out. The mob, led by Sal Bennett, had reached the top of the hill, and was sweeping forward on Cherry-trees in irregular formation. Some of its members carried torches; their yellow light glared upon two rudely-fashioned effigies, one of a man, the other of a woman, which were tied together, back to back and carried upon a short ladder supported on the shoulders of bearers. Around these things, mere bundles of straw stuffed into old garments and provided with masks, and swaying foolishly to and fro, a crowd of men, women, and young folk, lads and lasses, danced, leaped, skipped

and ran, some beating old pans, kettles, tea-trays, some blowing horns and whistles, one at least thumping a drum ; all screeching, howling, yelling, singing at the highest pitch of their voices. And now and then the sputtering torches threw into clear vision faces such as those folk saw in plenty who made a short journey from prison to guillotine in the times of the Terror.

" Lord, ha' mercy on us ! " exclaimed Tibby Graddige for the second time. And she dragged Rhoda down the stair and out of the house and through the orchard. Hand-in-hand, sobbing from fright, the two women hurried into the fields in the direction of the Limepits.

XVII

THAT night Taffendale had been called into the stables to look at a sickly horse ; coming away from the fold in company with his foreman, he heard the uproar which the stang-riders were creating around Cherry-trees. At his side the foreman uttered a sharp exclamation, and turned in the direction of the unholy sound.

" What's that ? " asked Taffendale, with a sudden premonition of approaching trouble.

The foreman, an old Martinsthorpe man, made a noise in his throat, which was half a groan and half a laugh.

" I'm afraid they're up to summat down yonder, sir," he answered. " I know what yon row means. They're ridin' t' stang ! It's many a year sin' that were done hereabouts. But I know t' sound. It'll be that their Sal Bennett and her lot."

" But—where ? " exclaimed Taffendale. " Where ? "

Without further word the foreman climbed the steps of the granary, beneath which he and his master were just then walking, and looked out in the gloom across the darkening surface of the uplands. Taffendale followed him. He knew what the answer to his question would be. Standing at the foreman's side, he, too, gazed at the glare of the rude torches which the stang-riders carried. The points of light whirled and eddied hither and thither, but as the two men watched they became concentrated upon one spot in the darkness.

"They're at Cherry-trees," muttered the foreman. "Cherry-trees!"

Taffendale swore under his breath. He gripped the rail which protected the head of the granary steps, and stared at the yellow patch of light with straining eyes. In the silence of the countryside the blare of the horns and the trumpet, the metallic clatter of the pans and kettles, the insistent thump-thump-thump of the drum, grew louder and louder; his nerves began to grow raw under the irritation.

"If there's anybody at home, there," remarked the foreman, "it'll be a bad job for 'em."

"There's Mrs. Perris there," answered Taffendale.

The foreman drew in his breath with a hissing sound.

"I didn't know, sir," he said quietly. "Well, happen they'll leave her alone, though yon lot o' Sal Bennett's is a wild lot. They'll stick at nowt when they're once stirred up, and——"

"We'd better get the men together and go down," said Taffendale. "There's Mrs. Perris and Tibby Graddige in the house. We can't leave them unprotected. I'll get the men from the pits."

But the foreman laid a hand on his master's

arm, as Taffendale turned to hurry down the steps.

"Don't, maister!" he said. "If yon lads from t' quarry meets wi' Martinsthorpers on a 'casion like this, there'll be murder done. Ye know what happens when they meet on ordinary 'casions. Don't, sir!"

"But the women?" exclaimed Taffendale.

The foreman looked out again across the level fields. "Best let yon lot get tired o' shoutin' and rampin' round there," he said. "Then they'll go away. Unless——"

"Unless what?" asked Taffendale.

"Unless," replied the foreman slowly and in a low voice, "unless they come on here, maister. Ye mun excuse me, but they've been talking and gossipin' down in t' village theer about you and Perris's wife, so I understand, and I'm a good deal mistaken if they don't come here."

"I'll make them repent it if they do!" said Taffendale between his teeth. "If they set foot on my land I'll——"

He paused as the foreman uttered a sharp cry, and seizing his master with one hand stretched the other out towards Cherry-trees.

"God!" he shouted, "Fire! Yon's fire!"

Out of the yellow glare which hung about Perris's holding, a shaft of bright flame suddenly shot up towards the stars. Another and another followed it; overhead the sky and the stars were rapidly blotted out by rolling clouds of flame and smoke.

"It's on fire—all t' place is on fire!" cried the foreman.

With a simultaneous impulse he and his master turned and hurried down the steps to the fold. The foreman began to shout loudly for the men and lads who hung about the stables, or lounged in and out of the farmstead kitchen.

"Murder or no murder, we'll have the quarry-men now," said Taffendale. And as the farm men came running up he seized the foremost by his shoulder. "Run to the Limepits and tell them to come—Cherry-trees is on fire!" he shouted. "The rest of you come on with me—come on!"

From the corner of Taffendale's garden a field-path ran straight across country to Cherry-trees; the path by which Taffendale had taken Rhoda Perris home on the occasion of her second visit to him. It crossed two or three widespread fields, and then came to a dip in the land wherein was a thickly-wooded hollow, through which ran a narrow stream. It was in that hollow that Taffendale and Rhoda had confessed their love, and it was there that he and Rhoda now met, as he hurried on at the head of his men. She and Tibby Graddige came panting down the path at one side of the hollow as the party from the Limepits ran down the other; on the little bridge which crossed the stream they encountered; the two women sank against the rails, fighting for breath. And Taffendale, regardless of what his men should see in such light as there was, put his arm round Mrs. Perris and supported her.

"You're not hurt?" he demanded. "They didn't interfere with you?"

Rhoda could only shake her head. Tibby Graddige found her tongue first.

"I dragged her out and away, just i' time, mestur!" she panted. "A minute longer, and they'd ha' been on to us. Howsomiver, we 'scaped 'em. But oh, mestur, they've setten fire to t' place!"

"I know—I know!" answered Taffendale. "You and Mrs. Perris must go on to my house. We'll hurry on to Cherry-trees."

But the foreman made an inarticulate sound of disapproval, and Tibby Graddige spoke again.

"Ye'll do no good, Mestur Taffendale," she said. "Ye can't save naught, sir. An'—they'll be comin' to your place. I heerd tell o' this, but I never thowt they'd carry it out. Ye'd best go home and see to yer own premises."

"Aye—shoo's reight, sir," counselled the foreman. "We can do no good at Cherry-trees. If they're coming to t' Limepits, we'd best see to our stackyard."

"They'll not dare!" exclaimed Taffendale. "They'll never——"

"Mestur, they'll dare owt!" said Tibby Graddige. "They'll be half-mad wi' drink and glory. It's yon rabble o' Sal Bennett's—theer's a hundred or more on 'em. Go back, mestur, and save yer own bit o' property."

"Aye, let's away back," said the foreman.

Taffendale made no further opposition. He followed his men out of the hollow, still supporting Rhoda, who clung trembling to his arm. At the top of the path the little party turned to look at Cherry-trees, now separated from them by only the hollow and one field. House, barn and stackyard were all blazing merrily, and through the clouds of dun-coloured smoke great flecks of flame and showers of burning sparks flew upward to the blackness above.

"They'll never dare to come to Limepits now," said Taffendale, bending down to Rhoda. "After that" he continued, pointing to the scene of devastation, "after that they'll all be for running away as fast as they can. That means prison for some of them."

But as he spoke, he and those about him became aware that the mob was already quitting Cherry-trees.

The torches came together ; the horns and the drum and the tin-pans were sounded with renewed fury ; and in the glare of the burning farmstead the watchers saw two straw-stuffed effigies lifted high above the heads of the howling and yelling crowd. Swaying and lurching, they were moved on again—not back to the village, as Taffendale had expected, but along the road which wound round by the fields and the corner of the woods wherein lay Badger's Hollow in the direction of the Limepits. Tibby Graddige uttered a loud exclamation.

"Didn't I tell yer!" she cried. "I said they'd come up to yer place, Mestur Taffendale. They're i' that condition o' pomp and vanity 'at they care for nowt nor nobody. I know what they're aimin' to do. They mean t' burn t' stuffed images i' front o' yer house, mestur, and to say t' stang warning."

"Come on, sir, let's get back," said the foreman.

But as they turned to hurry over the fields, the quarrymen came running through the darkness, ten or twelve great fellows, only too eager to come to grips with the mob. They were for crossing the land, and intercepting the stang-riders before they reached the woods. But the foreman, wise in his knowledge, counselled otherwise.

"Keep off comin' to blows wi' 'em!" he said. "I know what they want. Mistress Graddige here's reight. Let 'em come up t' road to t' farm, maister, and let 'em burn t' images and shout t' warning, and then they'll go away satisfied with what they've done. What we want to do is to keep 'em offen t' premises. Theer's five-and-forty cornstacks i' our stackyard, ye know, maister."

Taffendale knew that well enough ; he knew also what he had in his granaries, and stables, and barns, and byres, and sties. If the Limepits got on fire

thousands of pounds' worth of property would go. And he thought quickly and clearly for the needs of the moment.

"All right," he said sharply. "Quick, lads—back home! We'll surround the place and keep them off. When we get there every man and lad lay hold of a good stick, and don't be afraid to use it if there's any need arises. Now hurry!"

The mob was surging up the lane, more riotous and loud of lung than ever, when Taffendale and his men reached the farmstead. He hurried the two women into the house, and then posted the quarrymen and the farm hands along the front of the garden and entrance to the outbuildings.

"Do naught till I give the word!" he shouted, springing on the horseblock at his front gate in order to overlook his little army. "Keep in the background. If they'll go away quietly when they've finished with their damned ceremonies, let 'em go! But if they try to come in, drive them back and lay on hard."

The mob came along with the rush and roar of a horde of savages. The light from the flaring and guttering torches and naphtha lamps fell full on Taffendale, who remained standing on the horseblock watching his persecutors over a set mouth and folded arms. And as they swept up to his very feet he saw that every man and lad in the crowd either had his face blackened beyond recognition, or was masked by a piece of cloth in which eyelets had been cut. As for the women, they looked more like wild beasts than human beings, and their unbound hair concealed all that was to be seen of their features, save glittering eyes and shining teeth.

A storm of execration and obscene abuse burst over Taffendale as the crowd came to a halt and faced him.

It suddenly died down into a low continuous growl as he lifted a hand.

"Not a foot do you set on my property, you scoundrels!" he shouted. "You've done enough harm for one night down yonder, and some of you'll find yourselves in gaol before the week's out. Be off before you get your heads broken."

A further roar of abuse followed Taffendale's admonition, and one of the masked men forced himself to the front and shook his fist at the figure on the horseblock.

"None o' yeer advice!" he shouted, with a foul epithet, at which the crowd burst into a shriek of derisive laughter. "We know what's t' law and what isn't t' law. We're on the public highway, and ye can't put us offen it. We'm boun' to burn t' images o' ye and yer fancy woman afore yer faces—what, lads?"

In the midst of another storm of abuse some hand in the crowd threw a rotten egg at Taffendale with well-directed aim. The egg struck him full on the breast of his buttoned-up coat, burst, and bespattered the coat with its stinking contents. The mob yelled delightedly: Taffendale calmly divested himself of the coat and tossed it over the garden hedge behind him.

"Any more violence and you shall have something to yell for," he said. "I shan't warn you. Keep quiet, men!" he shouted, as some of the lime-burners started forward, cudgels in hand. "Keep quiet, I say! Let them have their play out."

The mob retreated a few paces to the broad strip of grass on the opposite side of the road. To the accompaniment of the blaring horns, the insistent thumping of the drum and beating of the pans and kettles, the leaders made their preparations for burning the stuffed

effigies, which still swayed and nodded in ridiculous fashion on the ladder. Some of the men carried bundles of straw ; others armfuls of sticks and dry wood ; a lad came forward with a tin bottle of paraffin. Facing the horseblock, on which Taffendale kept his position, defiant and watchful, they built up a pyre of straw and wood, on the apex they placed the figures, still tied together at the waists. To the accompaniment of an increased volume of objurgation the fire was lighted, and black smoke and bright flame shot upward above the glow of the lime-pits in the background. And Taffendale, looking round, saw in the windows of his house the white faces of the frightened women, and further away the last dull light of the fire at Cherry-trees—burnt out.

The masked leader who had answered Taffendale's challenge with defiance, sprang upon a heap of stones at the side of the burning effigies. As the flames roared and sputtered upwards he began to shout the words of the doggerel nominy, his followers of the mob dancing and leaping about him and the quivering tongues of red fire—

"Rang a dang-dang! Rang a dang-dang!
It's not for you nor for me that we ride this stang!
But for——"

Taffendale felt a hand pull at his knee. He looked down and saw the foreman's face beneath him, full of anxiety.

"Maister!" he said. "Maister! Look wheer them sparks is flyin'!"

Taffendale glanced at the shower of sparks sailing gaily away before the wind. A south-east breeze had been steadily rising and increasing in force all the evening, and now as the flakes of fire rose from the smoking mass on the roadside it was carrying them across the

corner of the garden towards the great stackyard which lay at the side of the farmstead. And, as the foreman had remarked in the hollow, there were in that stackyard five-and-forty stacks of wheat and barley and oats, the yield of the recent harvest. Taffendale, a wealthy man, had no need to thrash his corn, as most farmers did—almost as soon as it was got from the land. He could afford to keep it, and keep it for months he always did. No thrashing machine had entered his yard that autumn, nor would enter; there stood the forty-five stacks, stoutly thatched and neatly trimmed, not to be touched before the end of the next spring. And now the sparks were flying that way; as Taffendale and the foreman gazed anxiously into the blackness above them, they saw a scurrying lump of red fall on the roof of the pigeon-cote and continue to glow fiercely and to shoot out tiny sparks of flame over the surrounding tiles.

Taffendale snapped out one fierce exclamation and leaped from the horseblock. He snatched a stick from one of his own farm lads, and waved his arm to his men.

"Out with that fire!" he shouted, above the roar of the flames and the strident voice of the nominy caller. "Quick, men! Out with it! Lay on!"

The lime-burners leaped on the crowd with a fury that sent its members flying as sparrows fly before the sudden onset of a hawk. Up rose the cudgels and down they fell, on heads, arms, shoulders, and on the burning figures and the red mass of straw and wood beneath. But the beating in of the fire only sent a fresh shower of sparks whirling and eddying into the sky, to be seized and carried onward by the wind, and suddenly, high above the yells and oaths of the men and the screeching of the women, they heard the voice of Tibby Graddige screaming from an upper window of the house.

"The stackgarth's on fire! The stackgarth's on fire!"

Taffendale slashed the leader of the mob heavily across the face with his cudgel, saw him sink down into the bonfire like a dead man, and calling on the lime-burners and his farm hands, ran like one demented round the garden and the outbuildings to the stack-yard. And as he turned the last corner he groaned and sobbed from very despair and helplessness because of the sight that met him. Three of the closely ranged stacks were well alight, and blazing furiously, and the wind was carrying the fire amongst the others in wide, curling sheets of flame.

For a moment Taffendale halted, staring at the fierce, never-ceasing onslaught of the terrible force which was tearing its way through his safely-garnered produce. Already the flame was licking a hundred new paths from stack to stack; as the men hastened up, it hastened before them; as they beat it out in one place it burst out anew in another. Before his very eyes the side of a great wheatstack caught and harboured a spark, was transformed into a sheet of glowing red, and sent up a circling pillar of smoke, through which the fire flashed like a live thing. He stood dazed, trembling, utterly bewildered. He saw one of his lads dash out of the stable-yard on his own horse, and go careering madly over the meadows, leaping hedge and ditch as they came, and he knew that he was riding to call the firemen from the market-town, five long miles off. He saw the lime-burners and the farm hands tear down branches of trees wherewith to beat out the spreading flames; he saw the flames set fire to the branches and go on eating their way to the hearts of the stacks. He saw the foreman and others dragging tarpaulins over the sides of the stacks which the fire had not yet reached; the fire swept on and set the

taraulins alight, and more volumes of black and oily smoke rolled away to mingle with the flames. He saw the men driven back, driven away, until at last, smoke-grimed and singed and sullen they stood gathered about him, silently watching the great glowing mass of straw and grain, worth many a thousand pounds, mould itself into a mighty furnace, the glow of which was spread widely over the sky and was seen for miles upon miles by many a wondering town and village.

"That's done for!" said Taffendale at last. "There's naught can save it. Every stack 'll go. No use any fire brigade coming—they can do naught. But there's one good job—the wind's blowing it away from the buildings and the stables. Some of you go and quiet those horses. Let them out into the garth—they're worse than the women!"

The horses were screaming in the stables, and when the lads released them they rushed out into the home-garth and galloped wildly away across country, to round up at last in a shaking, quivering mass and, closely huddled together, to stare back in wide-eyed affright at the horror which had driven them close to madness. And Taffendale stared, and the men gathered about him stared, and the women, clustering in the farmhouse windows, stared, until in the grey morning the great fire burnt itself out, and where the stacks had stood in their prim neatness and ordered lines, thatched and trimmed and shaven, there was nothing but shapeless heaps of blackened refuse, through which evil tongues of feeble flame darted at every puff of wind.

And in that grey light Taffendale went back to the road outside the farmstead and looked at the place whereat the evil had originated. There were patches of blood on the yellow of the roadway, showing where

the lime-burners' sticks had cracked the villagers' crowns. And across the ruins of the bonfire, still tied together and only partially consumed, lay the straw-stuffed effigies which had represented Rhoda and himself.

XVIII

TAFFENDALE went back to the house, stripped off his smoke-blackened clothes, and plunged into a cold bath. An hour later, the sun being then well risen above the woods, he walked into the kitchen, spick-and-span, from his well-groomed head to his polished boots, to find the lime-burners and the farm hands busied over the breakfast which he had told his housekeeper to prepare for them. The occasion might have been one of rejoicing rather than of sorrow, for Taffendale had been prodigal in his orders, and the men were feasting royally. They stared open-mouthed at him as he strode up to the top of the long table at which they sat.

"Now, my lads," he said, "its no use crying over spilt milk. What's done is done, and it can't be helped now. What's more important is what is to be done. I want every sign and vestige of that fire cleared out of my stackyard to-day. Set to work on it as soon as you've had your breakfasts, and go at it with a heart and a half! There'll be drinkings for you morning and afternoon, and there'll be your dinner at one o'clock and your supper at six. Go at it, all of you—lime-burners and all. And when it's done there'll be a sovereign apiece for every man and lad. What I want"—he paused as a murmur of gratification rolled round the the table—"what I want is to see my premises cleared of every trace of what happened last night. As for those that caused it to happen—leave them to me."

Then he strode out of the kitchen followed by

voluble promises, and went to the parlour, where Rhoda, cowed and terrified by the events of the night, sat awaiting him. Before she could speak he laid his hand firmly on her shoulder.

"Now, my girl," he said, with a note of purpose and sternness in his voice which she had never noticed before, "I want you to listen to me. Maybe this has all come about because—well, because we didn't think, because we let our feelings get too much for us. But I'm not the man to be beaten down by what they call public opinion. When I decide to go on with a thing I go on with it against the likes or dislikes of anybody. And—you'll stay in this house."

Rhoda stared at him with amazed eyes.

"After—last night?" she faltered.

"Because of last night," said Taffendale. "Because of last night. I'll let whoever's interested see that I care naught for what anybody says. You're burned out of house and home, and here you'll stay. My housekeeper's also my cousin, and she'll play propriety and act chaperone and all the rest of the damned nonsense. And if anybody says a word, then they'll have to settle with me. Now I'm going to begin my reckoning with those devils in Martinsthorpe, and before I've done with them they shall wish that they'd died before ever their mothers bore them!"

Without more words Taffendale went away, saddled his horse with his own hands, and set out for the market-town and his solicitor. And so that he might fill his mind full of the enormity of the misdeeds of the stang-riders, he went round by Cherry-trees, to see the exact amount of damage they had done there.

Early as the hour was, Cherry-trees was surrounded by an eager and excited crowd. There were men there who should have been at work in the fields, there were whispering and awe-struck women, there were chil-

dren whose mothers had roused them from their slumbers with news of a great event. And there, talking gravely with the Martinsthorpe policeman, was the under-steward, one of the more considerable farmers of the village, who turned a troubled face on Taffendale as he rode up. He and his companion advanced to meet him; the other folk gathered in knots and stared at him furtively, wondering at his set face and the glitter in his eyes.

"This is a bad job, Mr. Taffendale," said the under-steward. "A bad, bad job, sir."

Taffendale made no immediate answer. He reined in his horse and looked around him. The picture of his own devastated stackyard was fresh in his mind, but here was one of still greater desolation. For Cherry-trees was burnt to the ground. House, outbuildings, sheds, all were destroyed; the very trees in the garden and orchard were shrivelled and twisted and blackened. There was naught to be seen in the triangle which Perris's holding had filled but heaps of seared masonry and grey ashes. And from the low murmurs and chance words which he had heard as he sat watching, he knew that such live-stock as had been left on the place had perished in the flames.

"Aye, it's a bad job, indeed!" said the village constable, desirous of showing his agreement with the under-steward. "I never heard tell o' such doin's."

Taffendale looked down at both men with scornful eyes and a curling lip. He laughed and they glanced at him wonderingly.

"And I suppose you could do naught to stop it?" he said, looking the policeman up and down.

"Me, sir! What could I do?" the man asked, genuinely surprised. "What's one man against a lot such as was out last night? They'd have knocked me on the head as soon as look at me!"

"But you represent the majesty of the Law," said Taffendale, sneeringly. "I should have thought they'd all have run away if you'd held your hand up."

The policeman's face became sullen, and the under-steward looked displeased.

"This isn't a time for joking, Mr. Taffendale," he said. "The constable's right—one man couldn't do aught against a mob like that. No, nor six men neither!"

"And I suppose there weren't any peaceable and law-abiding folk in Martinsthorpe village to stop those that were riotous and lawless?" exclaimed Taffendale. "You don't mean to tell me—and I shouldn't believe you if you did—that all the men and lads in Martinsthorpe joined in burning this place down and in burning my stacks? Why didn't you two get the better-disposed together, and stop the badly-disposed? If you'd liked, you could have prevented them from even coming up that hill."

The policeman looked uncomfortable, but the under-steward's face glowed to a dull red of resentment.

"It's not my place to keep order," he said. "It was none of my business!"

"No, it was nobody's business," sneered Taffendale. "Men like you were to sit at home, doing naught, while rascals and scoundrels were burning your neighbours' property! Your business! By God!—I'll tell you what's going to be my business. Come here you!" he cried, raising his voice, and waving his hand to the folk gathered about the grey heaps. "Come here, and hear what I've got to say, and go down to Martinsthorpe yonder and tell everybody. Tell them that Mark Taffendale says he'll neither rest day nor night till every man, woman, lad, lass, that had hand or part in last night's work

has smarted for it ! Tell them that he'll spend every penny of the sixty thousand pound he's worth to bring them to justice ! Tell them that he'll sell his land and lime-pits if need be to find money to punish 'em ! Tell them that when the law's done with them he'll start in with his punishment—he'll follow them wherever they go ; he'll make 'em marked men and marked women ; he'll make them so that they'll be thankful to be thrown into a gaol for shelter, and a poorhouse for food ; he'll make them wish that their right hands had been cut off before ever they set out up yon hill last night ! Tell them that if there's a halter about, they'd better use it before Mark Taffendale's hand is on them—tell them——”

The under-steward lifted his arm, and laid trembling fingers on Taffendale's wrist.

“Hush, Mr. Taffendale, hush !” he said. “Haven't you—haven't you heard ?”

“Heard—what ?” demanded Taffendale, shaking off the hand.

“We were going to tell you. There was a man killed last night. Young John Robey. And,” continued the under-steward, lowering his voice, and gazing fearfully around him at the wide-eyed and open-mouthed crowd, “they say, Mr. Taffendale, they say it was you killed him. You were seen to strike him down.”

Taffendale started. He remembered the blow which he had dealt out to the ringleader ; he remembered the savage delight with which he had felt it go home, and had seen the man crumple up across the glowing fire over which the effigies were burning. And he remembered, too, the stain of blood which he had found on the road when he had set out in the growing light.

“He was a wild young fellow, young John Robey,

it's true," said the under-steward, "but he was the only support his mother had, and they say he was always very good to her. However, they carried him away dead from your place, Mr. Taffendale."

"There'll have to be an inquest," observed the policeman.

Taffendale turned his horse's head.

"You always know where to find me," he remarked.

Without further word or sign he rode slowly off towards the market-town; behind him arose growls and murmurs of resentment. And one woman more defiant and courageous than the rest, raised her fist, and shook it in his face as he passed a group which stood at the corner of the high-road glaring at him from under their close-drawn shawls.

"This is what's come o' carryin' on wi' Perris's wife!" she shouted. "Tak' yer black face out o' honest folks' sight, ye ugly devil!"

Taffendale rode on and made no sign. He had no doubt that he had killed Robey, and the news had sobered him. But he had no fear of any consequences; he had struck the man in defence of his own life and property, and he knew he would go scatheless. If twenty Robeys and Sal Bennetts had been killed he would still have gone forward in his mission of vengeance until every participant had been made to feel his power. And when he walked into his solicitor's office in the market-town he was still as angry and as resolute in his determination to punish the stang-riders as when he rode off from the Lime-pits.

The solicitor let Taffendale pour out his wrath and utter his denunciation before he himself said a word. He even jotted down Taffendale's instructions without comment. They were plain and precise instructions, for Taffendale always had clear notions of his own. At once—that very day if pos-

sible—there must be printed and posted bills in big type, offering considerable rewards for information which would lead to the conviction of all persons concerned in the affair of the previous evening. Taffendale, in his anger, named ridiculous sums; the solicitor said nothing, and made a memorandum of them.

"I know the breed!" said Taffendale, savagely. "Most of 'em would sell their own mothers for a pint of ale. Offer that reward, and they'll all be tumbling over each other. I'll have 'em hunted down till I've laid every Jack and Jill by the heels!"

The solicitor, an old school-mate of Taffendale's, turned in his chair and put the tips of his fingers together.

"Finished, Mark?" he asked quietly.

"I've finished," answered Taffendale.

"Then let me talk awhile. War," observed the solicitor, "is a bad thing between enemies, but it is worse between friends. It is horrible between nations, but it is hell between two halves of one nation."

"Talk plainly," growled Taffendale.

"The internecine war in the United States," continued the solicitor, "was necessarily much more dreadful than any war between the United States and say, Spain, could be, because it is, I say, hell, and very bad hell for war to spring up in a community, whether that community is large or small. Well, in its way, Mark, a war in a village is as bad as a war between two halves of a nation."

"Damn it, why all this jargon?" exclaimed Taffendale. "What are you driving at?"

The solicitor tapped the sheet of paper on which he had scribbled his memoranda.

"I think it would be foolish to carry out these

instructions," he said. "Now, just be quiet and listen to me. Who started all this?"

Taffendale frowned

"It's no good denying it, Mark—you've been foolish about Mrs. Perris. I don't want to know the truth about your private affairs, but"—he paused and shook his head—"there'd have been no stang-riding at Martinsthorpe last night if it hadn't been for you. That's true!"

"Before God, she's as innocent as—as I am!" exclaimed Taffendale. "Foolish we may have been in meeting, but there's naught wrong."

"All the same, Perris left home," said the solicitor. "And folks talked. And as I say, the stang-riding would never have taken place if it hadn't been for you. There's nothing illegal in riding the stang—it's an ancient custom. And if you want my opinion, the fires resulted not from design but from accident. The places were not set on fire deliberately."

Taffendale's face darkened, and his mouth became more obstinate.

"I know what I've lost," he said sullenly.

"And I know that you're insured to whatever amount you've lost," said the solicitor, with quiet firmness. "Take my advice, Mark. Don't set all Martinsthorpe against you because of your sheer desire for revenge. Let the law deal with these people: don't you interfere. Remember, there's a man dead."

"They couldn't prove that I killed him," muttered Taffendale. "It was a mixed-up fight by that time. I have bruises on me."

"I don't think there 'll be any need to prove anything or disprove anything. But I know what the people will think and say," replied the solicitor.

"Come, there's enough bad blood—don't make more. Let things quieten down. Just remember—village folk have a rough and rude sense of justice, and they wouldn't have carried out that old Pagan practice of stang-riding if they hadn't felt they were bound to protest against your carrying on, as they call it, with another man's wife."

"You'd better throw up the law and take to the pulpit," sneered Taffendale.

"Not I! I'm no preacher, and I'm telling you what's best for you. Now, Mark, be sensible. Let things quieten down. And, Mark, take a bit more advice. Get Mrs. Perris home to her own people. You say you've taken her into your house. That's foolish. Get her away from it!" said the solicitor. "Come, be sensible."

Taffendale smote the desk at his side with a heavy fist.

"By God, then, I won't!" he cried. "The woman came to me for help, and I helped her. It wasn't my fault nor hers that we—that we fell in love with each other. She was in trouble then, and she's in trouble now—she hasn't a roof above her head—I won't turn her away from mine. Let folk say what they choose—there's my housekeeper there, and she's cousin of mine as well as housekeeper. Evil to them that think it! She stays there, I tell you."

"And—for how long, Mark?" asked the solicitor.

"Till—till I hear that that fellow Perris is dead, or till seven years is up," answered Taffendale, in a low voice.

"Ah! Then—you'd marry her?"

"I'd—I will marry her if the chance comes!" said Taffendale. "But—no talk of turning her out of Limepits. I'll go out myself first. I'm not going to see a defenceless woman treated that way

—especially if—well, if I've been anything like the cause of it."

The solicitor made no reply, and Taffendale suddenly stretched across the table, and seizing the memoranda tore the paper to shreds.

"Very well, I'll take your advice," he said. "I'll do naught against the villagers. But there's one matter you can attend to—you'll do it better than I shall. See that yon young Robey is properly buried, and pay all expenses, and let his mother know that there 'll be a pound a week for her as long as she lives. I wish to God it hadn't happened—but it's done now, and there's naught can undo it."

XIX

ON the second morning after the night of the stang-riding Taffendale rose at an earlier hour than usual—rose, indeed, before any of his men and maids had left their beds—and going out to his stackyard looked about him. The great, square enclosure, flanked on one side by the long line of farm buildings, and on the other by a row of tall poplars which formed a well-known landmark over a wide stretch of the surrounding country, had been so carefully and zealously tidied up and set in order by the farm hands and the lime-burners that it looked as if the departing tenant had left it swept and garnished for the incoming of his successor. There was not a grey ash nor a wisp of smoke-grimed straw left on all the wide surface; the men, in their zeal to carry out Taffendale's instructions, had even washed and brushed all trace of smoke and fire from the walls of the outbuildings and had lopped away from the poplars those lower branches which had been scorched by the leaping flames. Over all this emin-

ently spick-and-span scene, which would now remain an empty space until the next harvest, ten months hence, refilled it, hung the clear blue of a frosty October morning sky, in the far horizon of which a red sun was slowly rising. And Taffendale, looking round again, laughed grimly, reflecting that where, only a few hours before, the whole yield of a good harvest, carefully garnered and housed against winter, had stood proudly under its thatch, there was now nothing but a neat and tidy stackyard—empty.

“But there’s a different scene down at Cherry-trees, I’m thinking,” he muttered to himself, with another cynical laugh. “Nobody ’ll take the trouble to tidy things up there yet awhile.”

And, half-unconsciously, he walked slowly up the steps of the granary and stood where he and his foreman had stood when the unholy shoutings of the stang-riders had been carried by the freshening wind to their ears. From the head of the steps Taffendale had often looked out across country, and had more than once noticed that from that elevation—the highest about the Limepits—there were only three signs of human habitation to be seen. To the south-west the square, battlemented head of Martins-thorpe church appeared over the tops of the elms and beeches which shut in the village; far away on the eastward the spire of another village church, renowned for its height, rose above the thick woods beyond Badger’s Hollow. And in the middle foreground of the landscape stood Cherry-trees, a mean group of poor buildings when seen close at hand, but when viewed from some distance forming a pleasant patch of red and yellow against the prevalent green and grey.

This piece of colour was now gone. Taffendale saw the sturdy square tower in the near right, the

sharp, slender spire in the far left, but the little farmstead was brought down to the level of the land on which it had stood: there was not so much as a ruinous wall, a shattered mass of gable-end to rise above the hedgerows. As he lingered there, he pictured the scene—the blackness, the litter, the refuse, the general untidiness and sense of squalor, and some dim and vague notion came into his mind that somewhere, at some time, he had read something about the abomination of desolation.

Desolate and black Cherry-trees lay until the nine days' wonder of its downfall was well-nigh over. Such participants in the stang-riding as could be identified had been duly prosecuted and lightly punished; the dead had been sat upon by a Coroner and a jury, and consigned to a quiet grave, and like all country matters the affair was beginning to simmer down from boiling point to a stagnant surface. The steward came upon the scene, and with the understeward and various other folk of officialdom viewed the wreckage of the small homestead. And when he had viewed it he began to wonder what to do about the question presented to him. Was it worth while to rebuild the place? Cherry-trees, under Perris's tenancy, had some fifty or sixty acres of land attached to it; it so chanced that running alongside that land there was a holding of similar size which had been untenanted for half-a-year, and was not easy to let because the small house upon it was little better than an outbuilding and the outbuildings were ramshackle sheds. There was no possibility that Abel Perris would ever come back, and it was out of the question that his wife, or widow, whichever Rhoda might be, should continue to farm land on which she could not live; why not, then, reflected the steward, throw the two small holdings

into one and make a farm of a hundred acres and build a new farmhouse? After all, little farms and little farmers are a nuisance to themselves and to everybody.

While the steward, gazing on the black desolation of Cherry-trees, was reflecting on these things, Taffendale rode up the lane and paused to exchange greetings. He inquired what the steward's plans were, and the steward told him what was in his mind, and knowing him to be a practical man, asked his advice. Taffendale turned in his saddle and gazed across the acres which Perris had farmed and those of the holding adjacent to them. A sudden notion occurred to him.

"I'll tell you what I'll do," he said, with the directness of a man who makes up his mind quickly but once for all. "I'll take those hundred acres—at once."

The steward stared, and suddenly felt glad that Taffendale had come along. Then he laughed a little.

"Not content with all the land you've got?" he said pleasantly.

Taffendale shook his head in a fashion that signified neither assent nor dissent.

"It's not that," he said. "You know, I have land on this side of these two holdings, and I have land on the other side of them. I'll take both—the hundred odd acres of them—and link things up. I shall farm them better than any small farmer."

"Little doubt of that," observed the steward. "Very good. That shall be attended to at once. They're yours."

"But there are certain things you must do," said Taffendale. He turned again in his saddle and pointed to the ramshackle place which lay on the

holding next to Cherry-trees. "That'll have to come down—every stick and stone," he added.

"Oh, of course. We'll have it down and the ground cleared at once," replied the steward.

"And as for this place, Cherry-trees," continued Taffendale, looking around him, "you'll build me here three good cottages for married labourers. I've three real good men now that want to marry, and if I've cottages for them I shall be able to keep them on. Real good cottages, mind you, with proper outhouses, and accommodation for pigs and fowls."

"Very well," said the steward, who knew what sort of tenant he was dealing with. "That shall be done, too. It's a capital idea to keep men that you know."

"And there's another thing," remarked Taffendale, edging his horse nearer to the ruins, "you'll have to see that there's a proper water supply here. Now, the situation of the old house was a good one; facing south, and convenient for the garden at the back, but I always noticed when I came here that the well was set between the yard and the fold—there's the remains of it, sticking up out of that pile of rubbish—and I'll lay anything that the water's not what it ought to be. I once did taste it, and it was my opinion that it was badly contaminated. You'll have to sink a new well, at a proper distance from the houses."

"Yes," replied the steward. "We'll do that also. In fact, as you take the whole lot, everything shall be thoroughly overhauled and put in order."

"I'm particular about my men," said Taffendale. "If you want a model for the cottages, go and look at my lime-burners' places at the Limepits. But," he added, with a laugh, "they're on my own property."

"We'll make these as good," answered the steward. And he drove off, saying to the under-steward that Taffendale was a particular man and that they must be particular to please and humour him, for having once taken the land he would hold it as long as he lived, and they would be as sure of its proper and generous cultivation as of the rent, and, furthermore, be saved the troubles which arise from having little farmers of no capital, who put no money into their land and have hard work to pay for it, however much reduction they get.

"I'll have no more men of the stamp of Perris on this estate," said the steward, with decision. "I wonder where the man is!"

"That's what a goodish many hereabouts wonders, sir," replied the under-steward. "But," he added, with a sly chuckle, "we all know where his wife is—up yonder at the Limepits."

The steward, however, was not to be drawn into any discussion of local scandal or gossip. He remained indifferent to his satellite's obvious desire to talk.

"Mr. Taffendale's private affairs," he said, "are his—private affairs. If he chooses to give shelter to a woman who was burnt out of house and home, it is his own business. But Perris's disappearance is a public affair. It has a queer aspect."

"Aye, sir, and it isn't the only queer thing that's happened in this place of late," observed the under-steward. "There's a many folk hereabouts still asking themselves every day where yon Pippany Webster's disappeared to."

"Oh, the man ran away!" said the steward. "He just ran away."

The under-steward uttered inarticulate sounds of respectful dissent.

"Well, it's a queer thing if he did," he said. "I'll lay a crown to a penny piece yon Pippany Webster, sir, had never been five mile from Martinsthorpe since he was born, unless his mother ever carried him off for a jaunt, like, when he was a young child, for I'm very certain that he's never been away very far since he was a lad old enough to scare crows or lead a harvest cart. And besides that, his cottage has been examined by the police since he vanished, and they found what you might call a bit of a hoard in a secret place in an old cupboard—naught much, but two or three pieces of gold, and a matter of silver. A man like him would have taken his brass with him if he'd meant running away, sir."

"Well, that's certainly strange," said the steward. "Yes, yes, that seems very remarkable. But—where is he, then?"

"Nay, that's it," answered the under-steward. "Some, they thought he'd gone to his sister's, but his sister's heard naught of him. And he couldn't have 'listed, for they wouldn't have such a chap. And, of course, sir," he added, sinking his voice to a tone of dark and mysterious significance, "there is some in Martinsthorpe that thinks he's come to a bad end—happen done away with."

"God bless my soul!" exclaimed the steward. "You don't mean to say that the people think the man was—murdered?"

"Well, done away with—put out of the way, like," replied the under-steward. "Yes, there's some goes far enough to say that."

"But—by whom?" asked the steward. "By whom?"

The under-steward, however, was not going to be definite; he had been brought up on the good old village principle that a hint and a suggestion are better

than a direct charge, and that the wise stab folk in the back and only fools present honest weapons face to face. So he contented himself by remarking that no doubt there were those who could speak if they were minded to, and relapsed into silence until he and the steward reached the Dancing Bear and the pleasures of an afternoon dinner.

There are always folk in a village who can find time to lounge and idle away their time around whatever unusual operation is going on, and when the building operations began at Cherry-trees (to be rapidly pushed forward in view of the approaching winter) every fine afternoon found such gentlemen of leisure as the gamekeeper and the policeman, the village idler—by profession—and as many old gaffers as were past work but had strength to climb the hill, hanging about the place to see how masons and carpenters progressed. And there, too, but with different motives, constantly came Taffendale, intent on the due carrying out of his wishes in respect to the proper housing of his labourers.

The fine, dry weather of that autumn continued throughout October and November, and great progress was consequently made by the masons. It was a crisp day in December, and the walls were up and the carpenters at work on the roofs, when the sanitary inspector came with an expert in well-sinking to meet Taffendale and the under-steward in order to decide about the water-supply. Taffendale, on his own initiative, had caused the well which the Perrises had used to be examined and analysed; the result of the chemical investigations had proved its water to be contaminated by long filtration from the fold. That well, then, must be filled up, and another sunk. And the under-steward suddenly remembered that there had once been an attempt to sink a well at the

side of the old house, in the little orchard which was still there, and he remarked that according to his recollection, the work was not carried to any great depth, and that possibly, if it were now continued, water might be found at a lower level.

"Here's the place," he said, leading the party around him to the spot where the remains of the old reaping-machine which Perris had placed above the well-cover still lay amidst a mass of bricks and mortar. "It might be a good idea to clear this off and see if it promises aught."

The expert in well-sinking agreed ; water, he said, might have collected by that time, and if it had that would show that there was a likely spring. The under-steward called to some labourers and bade them clear away the rubbish. And so, for the first time since the night on which Perris had lifted it in the darkness, the cover of the old well was again laid bare.

The cavity beneath was black enough and odorous enough of damp and mud and slime when the rotting boards were lifted, and Taffendale turned up his nose.

"A likely place to get good water out of!" he said, with a sneer. "Better have it filled up like the other."

But the well-sinker shook his head. That was nothing, he said ; the well must needs be like that, having been closed up for so many years ; it could be made sweet and wholesome very quickly by exposure. The main thing was to find out if water was there, and he asked for a man, a ladder, and a lantern. The ladder and the lantern were quickly procured ; the man not so readily. But suddenly one of the masons' labourers, a Martinsthorpe lad, stepped forward, smiling sheepishly.

"Here, gi' us ho'd o' t' lantern—I'll away down," he said. "I'm none afeard o' no owd wells."

The men standing about watched the youth of no fear descend rung by rung of the ladder into the blackness beneath. Although it had never been finished the well was of considerable depth, and those whose olfactory sense was not too delicate to prevent them from hanging over the brink saw the yellow light dwindle to a spark. Suddenly they heard a loud yell; the brave explorer came up the ladder with the speed of a sailor of the old days, and presented a white face and staring eyes as he flung himself on the lip of the cavity.

"Theer's—theer's a man down theer!" he gasped, with trembling lips. "A deeäd man! A—a body!"

Taffendale could not repress a sharp exclamation. He had suddenly thought of Perris, and the colour rushed into his face and out again, leaving him pale. Could it be that this was—Perris? And if so—

"What?" he said, pulling himself together. "A dead man! Nonsense—you're dreaming."

"Go down yoursen, then, mestur," said the explorer, who was still trembling. "I know what I saw. Onny on yer can see it, if ye'll tak' t' lantern and go down as far as I did. It's liggin' theer at t' bottom o' t' ladder—it's a wonder ye didn't set t' ladder on it."

The gamekeeper and the policeman, who usually appeared at the building in company, had just joined the group. Justice, who had heard Taffendale's sudden exclamation and seen him change colour, gave him a sharp glance.

"Now, I wonder whose body it is, Mr. Taffendale?" he said in the familiar fashion which Taffendale so much resented. "It'll be very interesting to find that out, sir."

Taffendale's cheek flushed angrily.

"Whosever body it is, it must be brought up," he said. "Here, policeman, this is your job. Go down and see what you can make out."

The policeman, who had just donned his carefully-brushed uniform and put on his white wool gloves, hung back, looking down his nose.

"I shall make a fine mess of myself going down there," he remarked grumblingly.

"You're paid to make a fine mess of yourself if occasion arises," said Taffendale sharply. "Here, give him that lantern."

When the policeman came up again his face had assumed an expression of official importance. He stepped off the ladder and rubbed his hands clear of mud.

"There's a body down there, right enough," he said. "It's a man's body. But its head and shoulders are in the slime at the bottom, so I couldn't see the features."

"It'll have to be brought up," said the understeward. "Now, then, men—who'll go down with a rope?"

Half-an-hour later such folk as sat in the kitchen of the Dancing Bear were galvanised into life by rare news.

"They've foun' Pippany Webster's body i' t' owd well at Cherry-trees! An' them 'at's seen it say 'at he were murdered first and thrown in afterwards. He were foun' stickin' i' t' mud, and he wor deeäd. An' they're bringin' t' corpse down here for t' Crowner's 'quest!"

XX

THE gamekeeper, carrying his gun in the crook of his arm, followed the little group of corpse-bearers

down the hill at a slight distance. He was thinking. He had watched Taffendale's face when, the body having been brought up from the well, everybody had recognised it as Pippany Webster's. He had watched it again as Taffendale mounted his horse to ride home. He had wondered at the obvious agitation in Taffendale's manner and expression; at the pallor in his countenance. He had kept apart, watching. Once Taffendale had given him a swift glance, and he had replied to it with a steady stare. Now Taffendale was gone, and the body was being carried, according to law, to an out-house of the nearest inn, and Justice was very deep in thought, so deep that he started to hear his name suddenly called behind him in a loud voice. He turned and saw the young labourer who had first discovered what lay at the bottom of the well. He was still pale of face and excited, and he gesticulated as he came running up to the gamekeeper's side.

"Well?" said Justice.

The lad lifted his hand and wiped his forehead.

"God!" he ejaculated. "I—I wish I'd niver seen that theer! It's given me a reight turn. I shall see it agen to-neet when I get to bed. I wish I'd niver set ees on it, Mestur Justice. A reight bad turn!"

Justice began to walk on. The young labourer walked at his side, obviously glad to have living flesh and blood near him.

"Why should it give you a right bad turn any more than anybody else?" asked the gamekeeper presently. "Other folk saw it as well as you, you know, young fellow."

"Aye, but I were t' first to see it," answered the lad. "I were t' varry first. An' ye see, Mestur Justice, bi all accounts, I were t' last to see yon theer

Pippany Webster alive. But theer's noabody but me knows that."

The gamekeeper's ears pricked themselves instinctively, and his heart gave a smart bound. He made no reply, and showed no sign of special interest for the moment, but after they had walked on a little way further down the hill, he turned and looked at his companion with an affectation of concern and sympathy.

"Dear, dear!" he said. "Aye, I see you do look bad, Moreby, my lad. Here, let's turn across this meadow to my cottage, and I'll give you a drop of something to pull you round. You'll do with it."

"Why, thankin' you kindly, Mestur Justice," replied Moreby. "I were just thinkin' o' turnin' into t' Bear, like, to hev' a drop o' summat—I feel like I did once when I fainted when t' doctors were settin' a brokken arm 'at I happened."

"I'll give you some better stuff than you'd get at the Bear," said Justice. "Here, come on."

He opened a gate by the wayside, and conducting his companion across a meadow, which lay at the back of the village street, took him through the garden of the gamekeeper's cottage into Mrs. Justice's best parlour by a side door. Mrs. Justice was just then in the kitchen preparing tea; Justice passed on to her, obtained a lamp, water and glasses, and telling her to leave him alone for as long as he remained in the parlour, went back and took down a bottle of whisky from a corner cupboard. He poured out a liberal dose for Moreby, and helped himself to a smaller one.

"There, drink that, my lad," he said, with friendly hospitality. "That'll pull you round—that's better stuff than you'd get at the Bear for love or money. It's some whisky, this, that my lord sent down a

month or two since—six bottles of it for a present : it's what he drinks himself, is this."

Moreby gazed at his glass with awed interest.

"Well, here's my best respects, sir," he said, and drank. The colour came back to his cheeks, and his eyes sparkled. He set down his glass, drawing a long breath. "Aye, I wanted summat like that, Mestur Justice—I felt all dithery, like. Ye see, mestur, it come over me all of a sudden when t' body were browt up and we knew 'at it were Pippany Webster 'at just as I believe I were t' last to see him alive, so I were t' first to find him dead—what? Summat like what my owd mother, if she'd been alive, wo'd ha' called a judgment, mestur."

"Aye, just so," observed the gamekeeper, calmly lighting his pipe and passing his tobacco over to his guest. "Here, I see you've got a pipe in your waistcoat pocket there—have a bit o' bacca—that'll do your nerves good. And so," he continued, when Moreby had begun to smoke, "and so you think you were the last to see Webster alive, were you, my lad?"

Moreby took another pull at his glass and grinned.

"Well, I niver heard o' nobody i' t' village 'at iver did see him after I did," he answered. "I niver said nowt about it, 'cause ye see, Mestur Justice, I hed mi reasons for sayin' nowt. But I'll tell you what it wor, 'cause it doesn't matter now—mean't' young woman's concluded to break t' affair off, mutual, ye see, sir."

"Oh!" said Justice carelessly. "So there was a young woman in it, was there?"

Moreby grinned again, wagging his head.

"It were t' blacksmith dowter, ye see," he said, with a wink. "Her an' me, we wor doing a bit o' courtin' at that time, but we didn't want nobody to know, 'cause her father 'ud ha' been on to us. How-

somiver, one Sunda' evenin' a while back, her an' me hed met i' one o' them fields o' Perris's, near t' Cherry-trees, and we wor in a nice comfortable place i' t' hedgerow, wheer nobody could see us, and we see'd Pippany come across t' fields and mak' for Cherry-trees, and we see'd him sort o' spyin' about t' outside o' stackyard, and lookin' ower t' wall, and at last he went behind t' stacks, and then we niver see'd him agen, tho' we were theer till t' dark come on. And I niver heerd tell o' nobody ever seein' t' man efter that, sir—at least not i' Martinsthorpe. I kep' mi ears oppen, but I niver heerd 'at he wor seen bi onnybody. An' now then, I shan't mind who I tell, nor yit will t' blacksmith dowter."

Justice rose and put away the whisky bottle.

"Don't you say a word, my lad, just yet," he said, laying his hand on Moreby's shoulder. "Keep it to yourself till I tell you to speak. Pippany Webster was murdered!—and somebody'll swing for it. Keep quiet till I come to you."

Then he sent Moreby home, bidding him to eat a good supper, to drink no more, and to go to bed early, and Moreby, much impressed, promised, and went. When he had gone Justice ate and drank heartily, and with another curt word to his wife mounted his pony and rode off to the market-town and the police.

XXI

ON the Friday of Cattle Show week in London that year a man, dressed after the fashion of a fairly well-to-do countryman and carrying in his hand an ash-plant stick, stepped off a tram-car in the neighbourhood of Pentonville Prison, and after staring about him for a moment entered a public-house and asked

for a glass of ale. And waiting until the white-aproned barman appeared to have a temporary cessation from his duties, he summoned him with an apologetic grin and a shy nod.

"I say, mister," he said, leaning over the bar in a confidential attitude. "You'll excuse me, but I'm a stranger hereabouts. Where's that place or whatever it is that they call the Cal—Cal summat or other? Sort o' market, ye know."

The barman, from sheer force of habit, picked up a glass and begun to polish it vigorously.

"Caledonian Market," he said carelessly. "Third street on your left as you go up the road—you can't miss it."

"I'm much obliged, mister. Is there aught much to see there, like?" said the stranger. "I expect you'll know it, living so near."

"Plenty to see for such as likes that sort of thing," answered the barman shortly.

The stranger tapped the side of his boot with his ashplant and looked still more inclined to be confidential.

"Aye—why, ye see," he said, in the lazy fashion of a man who, making holiday, feels that time is of no consequence, "ye see, I come up to t' Cattle Show yonder at t' Agricultural Hall, and of course there's naught to see theer on a Friday, and my ticket isn't up till Sunda', and there were a man I met theer yesterday he says, 'If you want to see one o' the most remarkable sights o' London,' he says, 'go an' see t' Caledonian Market to-morrow morning. It's near Pentonville Gaol,' he says. 'Get out o' t' tram-car there, and any'll tell you just where t' spot is.' And so I thowt I'd just tak' a glass o' ale and ask mi directions, an'——"

"Third street on the left," repeated the barman, and

moved off to another part of the counter with a jerk of his head in the direction indicated.

The countryman drank off his ale and went slowly out, musing on the strange fact that Londoners never seemed to be inclined to have a bit of friendly talk. He lounged leisurely up the road, staring at the unlovely lines of the great prison on the opposite side, and marvelling at the groups of idlers who hung about its gates and at the street corners. And suddenly he was aware of streams of folk making up the incline of another street towards pillared gates about which was gathered a thickening concourse of men, women, lads, children, horses, carts, donkeys. He paused and rubbed the crook of his ashplant against his chin.

"This'll be t' market," he said to himself. "Gow! they're a queer looking lot this here to be goin' to market. They look more like as if they'd come out o' t' gaol yonder. I'm glad I took advice and left mi watch and chain and mi brass wi' t' hotel folk. Howsomiver, Roger Mallins, mi lad, here we are, and in we go!"

Once within the vast, four-square enclosure Roger Mallins eyed everything which presented itself to him with curiosity and wonder. He wondered who the people could be who wanted to buy furniture so old and decrepit that it seemed only fit for firewood; carpets so worn out that they were only fit for dust heaps; odds and ends of china and earthenware that appeared to have been collected from middens. He stared at the booths on which cheap haberdashery and glittering jewellery were displayed; at the men who, having no booths, spread out on the grass-grown surface of the market-ground all manner of flotsam and jetsam from heaps of scrap iron to books and pamphlets in the last and most woeful stages of neglect and decay. He marvelled at the people who thronged

about him ; at their speech, their manners, their attire ; himself, in his good suit of honest, substantial stuff ; his great coat of stout Melton cloth, through which no wind, whether of December or March, could penetrate, seemed to be of a vastly different world to that in which these human scavengers hung about the refuse heaps in which they took such obvious interest. That there was some merchandise of value in this strange Vanity Fair the Yorkshireman's shrewd eye was quick to perceive, but that fact afforded him no amusement ; what tickled his curiosity and aroused his senses was the other and newer one, that here were folk—hundreds, thousands of folk—who hovered about piles and spreads of mere rubbish as the foulest flies of the hedgerows hover around a dung-heap on a hot day.

" Ecod, this is t' rummest market I iver set ees on ! " he said, with a chuckle of contemptuous laughter. " I wonder what they'd say to this i' our part o' t' world ? Market, say ye ? Gow, wheer's t' cattle, and t' sheep, and t' pigs, and t' hosses ? An' by mi soul, theer is a hoss, and a bonny hoss an' all—wo'th about a fi'-pun note ! "

Between two rows of the unused stalls, in a quiet part of the market in which a few miserable horses, vagabond donkeys, and certain goats of both sexes gave something of an agricultural touch to the scene, a gipsy-looking fellow was showing off such paces as an ill-bred and ill-fed cob still possessed. Round about lounged a number of men who appeared to have some connection with horses by the fact of their wearing billycock hats, large-pocketed coats, and very tight trousers, and cultivated a habit of carrying bits of straw between their lips. Amongst them was a man somewhat better dressed than the others, a fresh-complexioned man who carried, as Mallins did, a

genuine ashplant, and had upon him a rustic air which betokened comparatively recent acquaintance with country life. Mallins at first glanced carelessly at this man; then he suddenly started, and looked carefully, then more carefully still; eventually, edging his way amongst the other men, he scrutinised him from head to foot. He drew back, screwing up his lips to a whistle.

"Psu!" he hissed between his teeth. "Yon's that theer Perris, 'at disappeared fro' Martinsthorpe yonder a piece back—I'll be dall'd if it isn't! He's grown a beard, but it's him. By Gow! him here, an' all that theer talk about his wife——"

The men around the miserable cob moved further away, chaffering and babbling, and Perris was left standing a little apart. Mallins hesitated a moment, and then went up to him.

"Ye'll excuse me, sir," he said, with an apologetic smile, "but aren't ye Mestur Perris, 'at used to farm at Martinsthorpe? I farm at Woodbridge, a few o' miles away fro' Martinsthorpe, but I'm sewer I've met ye, Mestur Perris, at market and auction days,"

Perris's face had flushed at Mallins's first words, and he edged away, eyeing the stranger defiantly. His eyes grew sullen and threatening.

"Ye've made a mistake," he said. "Ye've——" But there he paused, and walked a step or two into the throng. Turning, he looked back at Mallins with a glance which seemed to say, "Don't you interfere with me, because I won't be interfered with."

Mallins stood where Perris had left him, still watching. He shook his head, and presently taking off his flat-topped billycock, produced a highly-coloured handkerchief and polished his forehead. By the time he had replaced handkerchief and hat his thoughts had collected themselves and his mind was made up.

He advanced towards Perris, who was again left outside the crowd, and he boldly tapped him on the shoulder.

"It's no use, Perris," he said. "I know yer—ye're t' man. I know yer, for all 'at ye've grown that theer beard. An' I don't want to shove misen on to ye, nor onny other man, but—hevn't ye heerd t' news about ye're wife?"

Perris, who had averted his face at Mallins's second approach, turned sharply.

"I've heerd nowt," he muttered. "Nowt! An' didn't want!"

Mallins opened his mouth in sheer astonishment. Unconsciously he laid a hand on Perris's arm and drew him aside.

"What!" he exclaimed. "D'ye mean to tell me 'at ye don't know? Don't ye read t' newspaper?"

Perris shook his head sullenly.

"I niver read t' newspaper," he replied. "I know nowt."

Mallins drew him still further away, and his voice sank to a whisper.

"What!" he said. "Don't ye know what's happened to ye're wife?"

"Tell yer I know nowt," repeated Perris, with stubborn insistence.

Mallins drew back and looked at Perris in undisguised wonder. Then he advanced again, speaking in a loud whisper.

"She's i' danger o' bein' hanged!" he said.

Perris frowned. He had begun tapping the stones at their feet with the ferrule of his ashplant, and the tapping grew more insistent.

"For why?" he asked.

"Why, for t' murder o' yon Pippany Webster, 'at used to work for ye!" answered Mallins sharply.

"Gow!—I niver heerd t' like o' this here! I couldn't ha' believed 'at ye'd niver heerd on it. It's all t' talk o' t' countryside, man. But I reckon 'at them as lives i' London niver hears nowt o' what's going on down i' our parts. Howsomiver, Perris, that's t' Gospil truth. Gow!—I niver knew owt like this—it fair caps me!"

Perris stood like a man who has just awakened from some strange and unnatural sleep. He stared about him—at the people, the houses round the market, at the great tower in its centre, at the sky, the ground; finally, he turned to Mallins.

"Tell about it," he said dully. "I know nowt."

Mallins again took off his hat and rubbed his head.

"I'll tell ye all I know," he replied, "if ye'll come and tak' a glass somewhere, quiet, like. I'm fair moydered wi' this here—niver hed such a surprise i' mi life. I'm ditherin'!—wheer can we tak' a glass i' comfort?"

Without answer Perris made a sidelong motion of his head, and began to make his way through the crowd. He led Mallins across the market to one of the great taverns which stand at its corners, and passing into its recesses with the knowledge of one well accustomed to them, piloted him into an empty room. He maintained his silence until he and his companion had been provided with a generous measure of spirits; even then, he waited for Mallins to speak.

"Well, it's a reight dinger is this, Perris!" said Mallins at last. "Ye tell me 'at ye know nowt o' t' matter?"

"I've heerd nowt o' that part o' t' world sin' I left it," answered Perris. "An' didn't want to, neyther."

Mallins settled himself comfortably in his chair, his lips close to Perris's ear.

"Well, ye've a deal to learn, then," he said. "Ye

see, it's o' this way. Of course, ye'll understand 'at as I don't farm i' Martinsthorpe, I only hear t' countryside gossip, as it weer, when I go to market, but I think I've gotten t' tale reight. Ye see, Perris, mi lad, efter ye went away theer sprang up a deal o' talk about ye're wife an' yon theer Mestur Taffendale o' t' Limepits Farm, an' it was set about 'at her an' him wor ower friendly. It wor established 'at she'd visited him late at night at his house, when all t' rest wor i' bed, and so on, and so on—ye know—an' t' village folk talked, as they will, and finally it wor decided to ride t' stang for 'em."

"Aye?" exclaimed Perris wonderingly. "An' did they?"

"Did they? Aye, I should think they did an' all!" answered Mallins. "They tell'd me 'at such a do was niver known i' Martinsthorpe. They went up to t' Cherry-trees first, and somehow or other t' place wor set on fire, and it wor burnt to t' ground. If ye went back theer, Perris, ye wodn't know t' place. All 'at wor on t' premises wor burnt—t' live stock an' all."

Perris made no remark. He sat with his hands clasped on the top of his stick, his drink untasted at his side, staring at a framed advertisement on the dingy wall opposite—listening.

"An' then," continued Mallins, "then they went on to t' Limepits. One o' t' stang-riders wor killed dead theer—some said bi Taffendale hissen: howsomiver, nowt came o' that. An' Taffendale's stack-garth got o' fire, and ivery stack wor burnt—over forty on 'em. Aye!—such a night theer niver wor i' Martinsthorpe, so they say."

"Well?" said Perris, as Mallins paused to drink. "An'—after?"

"Why, efter that things seemed to settle down a bit," said Mallins. "Ye're wife wor taken in bi Taffen-

dale and his housekeeper, as is some sort o' relation to him, and there she bided. Then Taffendale took that land 'at ye hed, and another lot next to it, and t' steward agreed to build some labourers' cottages wheer ye're place wor. An' theer wor a deal to do about t' water supply, and one day they opened out an owd well——"

Perris turned to his glass and suddenly drank off its contents. He got up and rang the bell.

"Here, ye mun tak' a glass wi' me, Mestur Mallins," he said, as a barman appeared. "Two more o' t' same, young man. Aye," he continued, when the barman had served them and had disappeared again, "aye, an owd well, ye were sayin'?"

"An owd well," repeated Mallins. "An' theer they foun' t' body o' this Pippany Webster. An' of course theer wor the Crouner's 'Quest on it, an' all sorts o' what they call evidence started comin' out. It were proved 'at this Pippany wor i' possession o' facts about ye're wife an' Taffendale. Then it were proved 'at Pippany wor seen to go to ye're house on a certain Sunday night and wor niver seen efter bi onnybody i' t' village. An' one thing an' another come up—more nor I know on—and now, all t' talk is 'at it wor your wife 'at murdered Pippany Webster, and got rid o' t' body, and they do say 'at t' police may arrest her onny minute. But theer's more nor that, Perris, mi lad."

Perris looked round: Mallins's voice had grown serious.

"Well?" he said. "What more?"

Mallins bent neaer.

"T' theory, as they call it," he whispered, "t' theory is 'at ye're wife not only killed Webster, but 'at she killed ye an' all, and 'at ye're body's somewheer about t' Cherry-trees theer! That's what they think

i' our part o' t' country, mi lad. An' theer ye are, sittin' and takkin' yer glass, as large as life ! Gow ! but it's t' queerest do, is this, 'at iver I heerd on ! ”

Perris made no immediate remark. He continued to stare at the opposite wall.

“ What are ye goin' to do about it ? ” asked Mallins.

Perris began to scratch the floor with the point of his ashplant. To the man sitting at his side his apathy and unconcern seemed strange and unaccountable.

“ I been doin' a bit o' horse-dealin' sin' I came to London,” he said at last. “ I were goin' to meet a man this afternoon. But of course, seein' 'at things is as serious as what they are, I suppose summat mun be done. So they what they call suspect her o' killin' me, like ? ”

“ Aye, that's so,” answered Mallins, still mystified. “ Ye hed some transactions about sellin' some corn and some beasts t' day afore ye disappeared—what ? Well, this here theory is 'at ye did go home that night, an' 'at she made away wi' yer, and then gev out 'at ye'd disappeared. An' theer is them—a many on 'em an' all—'at says 'at Taffendale's known summat about t' matter, and 'at he happen helped to dispose o' ye're body, d'ye see ? But so far, they can't get what they call evidence agen him. Howsomiver, as I say, she couldn't ha' killed ye, Perris, 'cause theer ye are ! ”

“ Aw, I'm here reight enough,” agreed Perris.

“ Well,” said Mallins, after a short pause, “ I expect ye'll hev to let 'em know 'at ye're alive ? ”

“ I expect so,” replied Perris.

“ All t' same,” observed Mallins, “ that'll none settle up t' matter o' Pippany Webster's murder.”

“ Happen he worn't murdered,” said Perris. “ Happen he tumbled head first into t' owd well and brok' his neck. He wor a reight bad 'un, wor that

theer, for meddlin' wi' things 'at he'd nowt to do wi'. Happen he wor prowlin' about t' place and looked down t' owd well, and fell in. Like enough."

Mallins laughed and gave his companion a queer, sidelong glance.

"Aye, and happen he pulled t' well coverin' ower t' top when he'd tumbled in, and then set t' owd reapin' machine ower that!" he said with a sneer. "Nay, come! Besides, they foun' marks on t' man's throat. He'd been throttled. Murdered, wi'out a doubt."

Perris scratched the floor again, making strange marks on it with his ashplant.

"Why, I'm sewer it's a varry bad job," he said. "I'm afraid I mun put mi business off, and go down theer and see about it. How's t' time goin'? Aw, it's none twelve o'clock yit. I think I shall tak' a bit o' dinner; an' then go t' station, and catch the afternoon train. When are ye goin' back that way?"

"Not till Sunda'—I hev an excursion ticket," answered Mallins. "I'm goin' to see some relations o' mine 'at lives i' Kent this afternoon, and I shall bide wi' them till Sunda' mornin'. Aye, well, I'm sure it's t' best thing ye can do, Perris, is that theer—ye can't see t' woman pointed at all ower t' countryside as a murderess! Ye're presence theer 'll clear that mystery up, onnyway. An' as for t' other, why we mun hope some light 'll be thrown on it."

"Why, it's one o' them things 'at seems t' need a bit o' summat thrown' on it," answered Perris, as he rose. "Will yer tak' another glass?—I mun be off if I'm goin' to catch t' afternoon train."

But Mallins declined; he, too, would go, he said. They shook hands solemnly outside the tavern, and each man went his way. And Mallins, left to himself, was full of soliloquy.

"Ecod, but it's a rum 'un, is this here!" he said. "I wor wonderin' at one time if he'd hed owt to do wi' t' matter hissen, but a man 'ud none offer to go straight down theer, as he did, if he had. That 'ud be rammin' ye're head into t' lion' mouth wi' a vengeance, and——"

But then a sudden thought occurred to Mallins, which brought him to a sharp halt in the middle of the pavement, and made several less stoutly fashioned pedestrians eye him with unfriendly glances. Did Perris really mean to go down to their district, or was he only tricking him, meaning all the time to disappear once more?

"Gow, I owt t' ha' kept watch on him!" said Mallins. "Dang me for a butter-brained fool! How do I know wheer he lives i' London, or wheer he's gone?"

A little exercise of Yorkshire shrewdness and Mallins recovered his equanimity. He could, at any rate, assure himself as to whether Perris really went off to Yorkshire or not. He was well acquainted with King's Cross Station, and he proceeded there, and after eating and drinking, posted himself at the third-class ticket office to wait, if need be, till midnight. And at three o'clock up came Perris, carrying his ashplant, unconcerned and lackadaisical as ever. He seemed to attach no particular importance to the fact of Mallins's presence. They drank together at the refreshment-bar, and Mallins accompanied Perris to the train. They shook hands through the window.

"Well, I hope ye'll be able to put matters reight," said Mallins.

"Aye!" replied Perris curtly. "Aye!—I hope so."

Mallins walked away when the train was gone. He was still musing, still puzzled. But at last he lifted his head and nodded at the grey London sky.

"Yon man hed nowt to do wi' it!" he said, with firm decision. "Nowt! I'd tak' mi solemn 'davy o' that—he'd nowt to do wi' it at all!"

XXII

THAT afternoon, while Abel Perris was being carried on the final dreary stages of his journey northward, Taffendale rode into the market-town, and leaving his horse at his accustomed house of call, strode off to his solicitor's office. Every mile that he covered of the dull December landscape increased the anger, the resentment, the hopelessness of fighting against Fate, which ever since the episode of the stang-riding had been making his life a misery. He knew what was being said; he knew that there were many folk of the countryside who would not say, never would say, being wise, what they thought. He knew that men had changed to him personally, that those who had once been only too proud to get a nod of his head, a shake of his hand, were now quick to turn down a by-lane or to cross the street in order to get out of his way. Ever since the discovery of Pippany Webster's body he had ceased attendance at market, at auction, at the various committees on which he sat; it was not that he was afraid of showing himself, but that he was too proud to go where suspicion and covert looks awaited him. Now, as he strode out of the inn yard he could not avoid the bitter reflection that all was changed with him. Before this came to be he would have flung his bridle to the stable lads and have turned within the house, to pass the time of day in cheery fashion with the landlady behind her well-provisioned bar, maybe to have spent half-an-hour in friendly gossip over a glass and a cigar with such of the local

worthies as might be gathered there. He had no heart for such things now ; he already felt a pariah ; it seemed to him that in every face he met he read the question, " What do you and that woman know of this mystery ? "

Taffendale knew that he himself knew nothing, and it was not from mere chivalry or loyalty that he believed Rhoda to be as innocent as himself. He it was who had carried to her the news of the discovery of Pippany Webster's body, and he knew with the knowledge of absolute conviction that her blanching cheeks and dilating eyes meant innocence. He felt, with invincible certainty, that that was the first she had ever heard of the matter ; she had been keeping no secret. And he knew, too, that she had told him the truth when she had sent for him to tell him that Perris had disappeared and that she never set eyes on him since the hour in which he set out from Cherry-trees to sell his wheat. And yet, certain as he was of the innocence of both of them, Taffendale was just as certain that all around them all over the countryside folk were putting heads together and whispering in corners, and some declaring openly, and some only saying to themselves that Perris's wife was a murderess, and that he, Taffendale, was in some fashion her accomplice.

He strode into his old schoolmate's private office and threw his gloves and his riding-whip on the solicitor's desk with the gesture of a man who is being hunted to desperation.

" Look here, Wroxdale," he said, as he dropped into a chair ; " this has got to stop. Understand me—it's got to be stopped ! "

Wroxdale shifted the papers before him with a gesture which signified helplessness.

" How, Mark ? " he asked quietly. " How ? "

"That's for you," replied Taffendale brusquely. "You're a lawyer. Isn't there any law for me? Isn't there any for this poor woman? D'ye think we're both made of stone? I tell you the air's full of this poison. God—I seem to smell the very stink of it wherever I go!"

"You can't go to law with a rumour, Mark. You can't tackle suspicion as you'd tackle a man in the flesh," said Wroxdale.

"D'ye mean to tell me the law won't help me to make some of these lying scoundrels eat their own words?" demanded Taffendale. "Won't the law help me to crush down a damned lie?"

"Let anybody make a definite libel or slander on you, Mark, and the law will be there," answered Wroxdale. "But you can't put law into action against whisperings, gossipings, abstract things. As you say, the whole air is charged with this. Very well—you can't fight the air. This thing, Mark, is like all things of the same nature—it will have to pursue its natural course until its natural event is reached."

"And that?" growled Mark. "That?"

"The truth will come out," answered Wroxdale. "That's all."

Taffendale smote the desk at his side.

"Will? Aye, but when?" he exclaimed. "When? Are we to be under this vile suspicion for ever? I'm conscious that there's something going on all round us that I don't know of, that——"

Wroxdale lifted a finger.

"Stop, Mark," he said. "I'll tell you all I know. I get to hear things, you understand. I believe matters are coming to a head. Mark, you needn't be surprised if Mrs. Perris is arrested before long."

Taffendale's anger suddenly cooled. He made an

effort to keep himself within strict control, and after a moment's thought he spoke quietly.

"Now, then, Wroxdale," he said, "just tell me, between ourselves, what, in your mind, they can have against her? Speak straight. Straight!"

The solicitor looked searchingly at his old school-mate.

"Very well, Mark," he answered. "Quite straight, mind. Nothing, then, I think, that is direct. But try to be dispassionate and to consider plain facts. It is matter of common knowledge that Mrs. Perris did not care for her husband. They had frequent scenes—quarrels—or, perhaps, one should say, she, to use countryside parlance, often let him hear her tongue. She was ill-advised enough, foolish enough, to let other people know that she despised him—she said more than she should have said about him to the woman who went to work there—Mrs. Graddige. She came across you—she made your acquaintance. She was known to spend some time with you in your house when the rest of your household had retired—this happened on two occasions. It is known that on the second of these occasions you left the house with her late at night, and were absent nearly two hours. It is known—by the curious piecing together of things by that gamekeeper, Justice—that you and she used to meet in Badger's Hollow, and that the man Pippany Webster became cognisant of the fact. Now, consider—Pippany Webster is seen to enter the premises at Cherry-trees and he is never seen again. Shortly afterwards Perris leaves his house one day, tells his wife he is coming here to town to sell his spring wheat. He does that, and he also sells some stock. He tells the people to whom he sells these things that he may not be at home next day, and gives them written authority to take away their purchases. Next day his wife sends

for you and shows surprise, genuine or affected——”

“It was real!” exclaimed Taffendale. “Real, I say!”

“Genuine or affected,” continued Wroxdale coolly, “that her husband has not returned home. But it is now established, on the testimony of two good witnesses, that Perris was seen near Cherry-trees at twelve o’clock that night, and the presumption is that he did return home, to a house in which there was no one but his wife. From that day to this Perris has never been seen or heard of. Rumours begin to spread—the conduct of Mrs. Perris and yourself is discussed, and the village tongues wag. Mrs. Perris’s position becomes painful, and she feels that she must leave the place. Here you make a foolish step. Instead of insisting on her returning to her friends, her relations, you arrange that she shall go to a seaside place and you furnish her with funds. Mrs. Perris is again so ill-advised as to make a confidante of Mrs. Graddige, to whom she tells this——”

“She trusted the damned old harridan!” growled Taffendale. “She’d no one else to confide in.”

“—and, who, woman-like, was quick to remember what she had been told when the time came for remembering it to some purpose,” continued Wroxdale. “Now, before Mrs. Perris could leave, the affair of the stang-riding took place. That, through a series of events into which we need not go, led to the discovery of the body of Pippany Webster. And it is impossible to deny, Mark, that here is a body of evidence which must needs make Mrs. Perris an object of suspicion. All sorts of theories might be evolved out of it. Pippany Webster might have threatened her with exposure—she is a strong, muscular young woman, and she could kill him easily. She might have quarrelled with her husband on his return the night he sold

that stock—he was probably the worse for liquor—and killed him, possibly accidentally, in the course of the quarrel.”

Taffendale threw up his head and laughed sneeringly.

“Where’s the man’s body, then?” he asked.

“I said I would tell you plain facts,” said Wroxdale. “Well, one plain fact is that there is a theory abroad that she concealed Perris’s body somewhere on the premises, and that it was burned in the course of that fire. A wild theory, you may say—but a possible one, Mark, a very possible one. Remember, in all cases like this, cases of mystery, everybody will theorise. I dare say the wildest, the most extravagant theories have been made in the various bar-parlours, and round the inn kitchen fires. Folks will talk.”

Taffendale picked up his gloves and his riding-whip.

“I wish it was all over,” he said. “I wish something would bring it to a head. It’s like fighting something in the dark, a shadow, something that you can’t get hold of. It’s—awful!”

He rose to his feet, turning to the door, and Wroxdale rose, too. The solicitor trifled with the papers on his desk for a while before speaking again.

“Well, Mark,” he said, at last, “perhaps it may come to a head sooner than you think. Between you and me, I’ve heard that there’s been a Scotland Yard man down here for a week or two. My information may be wrong, but I have heard that he’s working disguised as a labourer at Cherry-trees, on the cottages you’re building. If he and the local police get anything like a decent clue, a line to follow, they’ll act. And then—well, then a great deal of suspense will be over. At any rate, Mrs. Perris will know what she’s called upon to face.”

“Man, she’s as innocent as a child!” exclaimed

Taffendale. "Whatever her faults are or may have been, I'd stake all I've got in the world and whatever I hope for in whatever there is to come on her innocence. She knows no more of the death of that man Webster, nor where Perris is, dead or alive, than you do! By God!—I'm sure she doesn't. And see here, Wroxdale—supposing she is tried, and found innocent, as she must be—there's lots of 'em round here 'll go on saying she's guilty. Bah!—I wish I could shoot most of 'em—a pack of canting hypocrites!"

"Human nature, Mark, human nature! But you're right," said Wroxdale, "you're quite right. Nothing will make this matter clear, white, plain again until two things can definitely be proved—who killed Pippany Webster, and where is Abel Perris, dead or alive? That's the truth."

Taffendale turned to the door and hesitated before he had taken more than a step. He turned again, laughing bitterly.

"You see what a coward I've become, Wroxdale!" he said. "I hate the thought of going to the George for my horse, although it's dark, for I know that the very stable lads look at me with curiosity."

"Then don't go," said Wroxdale kindly. "I'll send for your horse round here, to my garden gate."

But Taffendale shook his head and put on his hat with a firmer pressure. No, he was going to keep a stiff upper lip through it all. And he strode away to the inn and got his horse and rode off into the darkness, breathing more freely when the lights of the little town were left behind.

It was half-past five o'clock when Taffendale reached the Limepits, and the land was lying under a wintry pall of drear blackness around the solidly built farmstead and its long range of gaunt buildings. There was not a sign of a star in the sky, but from the quarry

a circling shaft of flame was shooting up to the night from a newly-lighted kiln. It made a pillar of fire in the gloom, and as Taffendale glanced that way, previous to passing in at his yard gate, he saw a dark figure standing outlined against it on the edge of the quarry at the spot where he and the gamekeeper had talked that morning which now seemed so far off. There was something curiously sinister in the sight of that figure, made preternaturally tall and spectral by the flame behind it, but Taffendale gave it no more than a glance. He took his horse to the stables, and going through the house went to the parlour, where he expected to find his housekeeper and Rhoda at tea. The housekeeper was alone, and as the door opened she looked up with something of anxiety.

"Where's Mrs. Perris?" asked Taffendale.

The housekeeper, an elderly woman, who had managed Taffendale's domestic affairs for many years, shook her head.

"I don't know," she answered. "She's been out nearly all this afternoon—at any rate, since long before it was dark. And, Mark—I'm beginning to get frightened about her."

"Frightened?" said Taffendale. "Why?"

"I don't know. She—she seems strange, abstracted in her manner," replied the housekeeper. "She never talks now, and she sits staring at—nothing. She oughtn't to be left alone, Mark. And I didn't mean to leave her alone this afternoon—she slipped off when my back was turned."

Taffendale stood for a moment trying to realise this new trouble. He suddenly remembered the dark figure outlined on the edge of the quarry, against the leaping pillar of flame.

"I'll go out and see if I can find her," he muttered.

He went across the garden and the land which separated the farmstead from the lime-pits with new sensations of fear in his heart. He was not unobservant, and he had long known what Rhoda was suffering. She talked little: she never smiled; she had begged to be allowed to take part in the house-work, and the housekeeper, like a wise woman, had kept her fully employed. But Taffendale had seen that she was every day becoming more and more melancholy, and a vague dread, which he could not analyse, was springing up in his heart about her. What if—but at the first prompting of what was in his mind he tightened his hold upon himself and strode on.

The figure which he had seen on the edge of the quarry was no longer there, no longer, at any rate, between him and the leaping flame. He hurried on until he came to the very edge of the great chasm which many generations of the Taffendale lime-burners had made in the land; the yellow light from the newly-built kiln gleamed on the uneven flooring far below. And glancing anxiously about him, he was suddenly aware of a dark figure which sat, huddled up, in a little alcove cut out of the bank, and with a stride he reached and touched it.

"Rhoda!" he said fearfully. "Rhoda!"

And with a quick leaping of something that he could not explain, he dropped on his knees at her side and felt for her hands. In the light of the flame beneath them she lifted her face, and Taffendale groaned at the pain in it.

"Oh, Rhoda!" he cried. "What's this? Why are you here? Your hands—they're like ice. You'll catch your death of cold sitting here. Come away, Rhoda, come away!"

For a moment she made no answer, and in the stillness Taffendale heard two sounds. One was the

cheery crackle and splutter of the fire burning merrily in the quarry; the other the onward rush of an express train tearing its way across the level land some miles off across country. In that train sat Perris, sucking stolidly at his pipe—but of that Taffendale knew nothing. He only knew that Rhoda was in the grip of a power beyond him.

She turned her face full upon him presently, and he saw that it was white and drawn, and that her eyes were full of something that he had never seen there before. And suddenly she disengaged one of her hands, and lifting it, smoothed the hair away from his forehead. Until then he had not realised that he had hurried out of the house without hat or cap.

"Mark!" she said quietly. "Mark!—I came out here to kill myself."

Taffendale, overwrought already by the conversation which he had had with Wroxdale, felt a great sickness break over him on hearing these words, spoken so calmly as to carry conviction of a sure purpose. He never afterwards heard the crackling of a kiln fire nor the roar of a distant train without remembering them and his own terrible sense of helplessness to answer them. He could say nothing, but he bent his head on the woman's shoulder and groaned.

"I didn't see aught else to do," Rhoda said, after a long silence. "I've laid awake at night and seen no other way. It's come up before me as I went about the house and did what bit of work I could find to do, and still there seemed nothing else—nothing. I know what they're all saying, and how they look at you and I've thought that if—if I was out of the way things might be different."

"No!" said Taffendale. "No!"

"And there's another thing," continued Rhoda,

as if she had not heard him. "I've thought that it was all my fault. I did wrong to Perris. I never ought to have married him. I treated him bad—now and then. And I did wrong to you—only I got fond of you all of a sudden, before I knew, and without thinking. I—I treated Perris better after I loved you, because I was sorry for him. And though I'm as innocent as can be about these things, still it's been my fault, and I've thought that perhaps if I died all might come right. I don't know why I thought that—my head gets so queer—but I thought it. And when I came out this afternoon I meant to go, Mark. I'd reckoned it all up—I'd wait till dark and then I'd walk along the edge of the quarry here—there's a bit of old paling just there that's rotten: I meant to lean against it, and I should have fallen over when it broke under my weight, and then, you see, everybody would have thought it was an accident. And I came here and stood a long time, watching the kiln burn, and something was always telling me to wait, to wait!"

Taffendale put his arm round her with a strong grip. His resolution had come back to him as he listened to the confession of feminine weakness.

"Come away, Rhoda!" he said. "Come away—now! You're innocent, and God knows it, and I know it—come, be brave. Perhaps you're to wait for something that's going to prove it. Come away!"

Rhoda sighed heavily, but she made no resistance when he raised her to her feet. For a moment he took her into his arms and drew her face to his.

"Promise me you'll never think of that again," he said. "Or that if you do you'll come to me."

"I'll come to you," she answered quietly. "I'll be sure to come to you."

Taffendale led her across to the house in silence and into the parlour. He gave the housekeeper a look

and a nod as they entered, and the housekeeper understood and began to bustle around the tea-tray. And Taffendale, with a heart as heavy as lead, endeavoured to make conversation over the tea and the toast, and while he chattered was thinking vaguely of something which he had once read about some man or other who played the fool and made merriment on the stage while his heart was torn within him because at home a child lay dying. He knew that that cosy parlour, with its evidences of prosperity, made a warm and attractive picture; he knew also that on the hearts of two people who sat in it the fear of the unknown lay heavy and cold.

"There's a gentleman at the garden door wants to see the master, if you please," said one of the maids, entering the room as Taffendale was talking for talk's sake. "Shall I take him into the little room, sir?"

"Aye, take him into the little room," replied Taffendale. He made a pretence of lingering to drink his tea, and he murmured something about having expected a customer for a supply of lime. But he knew that Rhoda had started when the maid tapped at the door, and that for the first time in his life his own hands were trembling. And when he rose and left the parlour he was careful to avoid the woman's eyes.

There was a small room near the garden door, which Taffendale used as a sort of office. He braced himself as he opened the door and walked in, for he had a curious presentiment of what he was about to face. And suddenly he was within the room, and the door was shut behind him, and he was mechanically shaking hands with the district superintendent of police—an elderly, bearded man, whose face expressed anxious concern.

"Yes?" said Taffendale.

The superintendent glanced at the door.

"Mr. Taffendale," he said in a low voice, "I'd rather this had been anybody's job than mine. Mrs. Perris—you understand, sir?"

"There's been a warrant issued?" said Taffendale dully. "Eh?"

The superintendent tapped the breast of his overcoat.

"Just so, sir," he answered. "I have it here. And down the lane there I have a very comfortable two-horse cab from the George. Now, Mr. Taffendale, I want to do all this with as little trouble to Mrs. Perris as ever I can. She's here, of course, sir?"

"She's here," said Taffendale.

"Well, now, now, sir, I've no doubt she'll do anything that you suggest," said the superintendent. "How would it be, Mr. Taffendale, if you just prepared her and asked her to come with us, and we'll put off the formal business until we get to the office? Then I needn't bother her just now, you see. I've no doubt she's ready to meet this charge, and she'll be glad to get it over."

"Yes," said Taffendale. "Yes—that will do. Thank you—it's good of you. I'll prepare her, and then we'll go with you. I may come, I suppose?"

"Certainly, certainly, Mr. Taffendale—there's plenty of room in the cab for you, sir," replied the superintendent. "Oh, certainly, come by all means."

"And another thing," said Taffendale; "on our way to the police-station, may we call at Mr. Wroxdale's, my solicitor, and take him on with us? I want him to be there."

"Certainly you may, sir, with pleasure. I'll give orders to the driver, who, between ourselves, is one of my men," said the superintendent. "Yes—anything to make matters pleasant."

"We shall be ready in a few minutes," said Taffendale. He crossed the room to a cupboard and brought out whisky and soda and glasses. "You'll take a drink?" he said. "Well!" he went on, as he helped the superintendent and poured out a glass for himself. "I'm glad it's come at last—the suspense was killing her."

"Poor thing—poor thing!" said the superintendent sympathetically. "I've no doubt it was. Yes, it's best to get at these things and be done with 'em, one way or the other. Your health, sir. Now, you'll bring her here to me all ready, Mr. Taffendale—you'll understand that after I've once seen her I can't lose sight of her again. There shall be naught said now, sir, beyond a pleasant word or so—a 'good evening,' eh?—and we'll drive straight to Mr. Wroxdale's and he shall go on with us. And—and tell her not to be afraid, sir."

Taffendale nodded and left the room. He stood in the hall for a minute, thinking. Then from an old chest he took out two thick carriage rugs and laid them in readiness; near them he placed a heavy travelling cloak, which had been his mother's. That done, he opened the parlour door and called the housekeeper, and in a word or two explained what had happened and bade her keep out of the way for a few minutes. And then he opened the door again and went in to Rhoda. She gave him one quick look and rose, and the colour flushed into her pale cheeks. He saw that she knew.

Taffendale took her hands.

"You wanted this to be settled, Rhoda?" he said.

"Yes—yes!" she breathed quickly. "Yes—oh, yes!"

"Then—it's going to be settled now," he said.

"They've—come for me?" she whispered.

Taffendale nodded.

"I'm ready—and I'm glad," she said. "Now—tell me what to do. But first——"

She threw her arms about him passionately and kissed him. And Taffendale asked himself as their lips met if that was for the last time.

Five minutes later Taffendale opened the door of the little room, and cried cheerily and bravely—

"Now, Mr. Superintendent, here's Mrs. Perris—all ready for you, and well wrapped up for a cold drive!"

XXIII

THERE were three railway-stations in the market-town; that at which Perris arrived lay in a valley, far out from the centre of the place, and during his two years' acquaintance with the neighbourhood he had never seen it or its immediate surroundings before, never having had occasion to travel by the small branch line which had brought him to it from the main line at the big junction twelve miles off. Only himself and one more passenger left the train; on the wind-swept platform there was no one to be seen but a porter; the station itself was poorly lighted by a couple of oil-lamps; outside it the winter night was cheerless and black. Within a minute or two of his leaving the train, Perris was standing outside the station in the midst of a darkness that seemed all the denser because of his recollection of the brilliantly lighted scenes amidst which he had often wandered at night, lonely and wondering, during his residence in London. High above him, but some little distance away, he saw the lights of the market-town, the approach to which was by a

winding road, lighted at long intervals by feeble and flickering jets of gas that shivered in their lamps; in a dip in this road he saw more lights which seemed to betoken the presence of a small, outlying hamlet, or cluster of cottages; amongst those lights was one which shone through red curtains. Perris felt cheered at the roseate glow.

"I'll lay yon's a public," he muttered. "Publics has red blinds as a rule. I'll call in and tek an odd glass afore I walk up to t' town—I could do wi' summat after that theer journey, and wi' a bite o' summat to eat an all."

Moving forward along the ill-lighted road, he came to a small inn which stood on an open space surrounded by a half-score of old cottages. It was no more than a wayside ale-house, and in the dim light of the one lamp which stood in front of it Perris regarded it doubtfully. But hunger overcoming his doubts he eventually pushed open the door and walked into a sanded passage, on either side of which were rooms meanly furnished with rough tables and benches of unpainted wood. There was a heavy scent of stale liquor and of pungent tobacco in the atmosphere, and as Perris closed the door behind him, he heard the loud voices of men in what appeared to be an argument of a spirited nature.

These voices came from the room on the left hand side of the passage, and Perris instinctively turned into the opposite one and was thankful to find it empty, for he was in the state of mind that makes a man desire loneliness. He sat down at one of the rough tables and rapped on its surface with his ash-plant. An elderly woman, hard-bitten, tall, gaunt, appeared from some interior part of the place, drying her hands on her rough apron, and looked an inquiry in silence.

"I'll tek a glass o' Scotch whisky, if you please," said Perris.

The woman shook her head.

"We've no licence for spirits, mister," she answered. "Only for ale and porter."

"Then a pint o' ale," said Perris. "An' happen ye could let me hev a plate o' bread-an'-cheese with it."

"Yes," replied the woman. "We've some good cheese just now. Happen you'd care for a pickled onion?"

"I shouldn't hev no objection," Perris answered. "Ye needn't be sparin' wi' t' bread-an'-cheese—I'm a bit hungry, like."

The landlady went down the passage, and Perris laid aside his ashplant and stared at the brewers' advertisements and grocers' almanacks which adorned the dingy walls.

In the other room across the narrow passage its occupants were continuing their loud-voiced debate; since Perris's entrance two of them had been speaking at the same time, and he had paid no attention to them, being more intent on his own affairs, but now one man had obtained a proper hearing and his voice came loud and clear into the room in which Perris sat alone. And Perris suddenly caught a word and a name, and he sat erect and listened.

—"an' I tell yer 'at our Jack's been workin' at yon theer Cheery-trees ever sin' they started building them cottages for Taffendale, and as he's been on t' spot all t' time 'at this has been goin' on, who's more likely to know all about it than what he is? He were present when t' body o' yon man 'at they called Pippany Webster were found—he helped to draw it up out o' t' well, and he heerd what they said 'at rekernised it, and I tell yer he's been theer

ever sin,' and of course he's seen all and heerd all 'at there were to hear an' see. Our Jack's more likely to know all about t' matter than what ye are, and that he'd prove to yer if he were i' this company—now then!"

"Well, an' as ye're Jack isn't in this comp'ny ye can tell us what ye're Jack knows—I mean summat 'at folk like us doesn't know," said another voice, somewhat scornful and sceptical in tone.

"Our Jack knows what t' opinion o' them 'at's on t' spot is, mi lad, and ye're not on t' spot, any more nor what any on us here present is. Them 'at's been theer has drawn their own conclusions. It's t' common opinion 'at t' woman, Mrs. Perris, not only did away wi' yon Pippany Webster, but 'at she did away wi' her husband an' all. That's what t' common opinion is, so theer!"

"Well, I don't believe it!" said the scornful voice, with unrestrained contempt. "I don't believe 'at she killed Perris, nohow!"

"Then wheer is Perris? Ye tell me that! Wheer is t' man? Has he gone up above, as them theer owd pateriarks did 'at ye hear tell about i' t' Good Book, or has he been spirited away bi t' Owd Lad, or what? Men doesn't disappear same as if they were t' smook out o' this here pipe——"

"A' but don't they? Don't ye mek no mistak's! Theer's been many a man disappear 'at's never been heerd on agen—many a man, I say. I' my opinion yon theer Perris just took hissen off, quiet like, an——"

The landlady brought Perris his supper, took his money, and vanished. And Perris, with a queer smile, drank of his ale, crammed his mouth with food, and continued to listen attentively. The conversation in the other room had reached another point.

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"Then ye tell me this—if t' woman did mak' away wi' Perris, what did she do wi' t' body? Now then, there's summat for yer to answer. What's ye're Jack say to that theer, now? Come!"

"Our Jack says what t' common opinion says about theer. It's supposed, d'ye see, 'at t' woman, when she'd made away wi' her husband, concealed t' corpse somewheer on t' premises, which is what she could easily do, theer bein' a good deal o' opportunity about a farmhouse. She could ha' hid him i' t' hay-cham'er, or i' t' barn, or i' t' granary, or——"

"An' d'ye mean to tell me 'at a woman could lift a man' corpse an' carry it away to eyther barn or hay-cham'er, or granary, or onnywheer else? A dead corpse, as everybody knows, is heavier nor when it's alive."

"Aye, varry like it is so, but yon Mrs. Perris, she's a reight fine, strong young woman, and as like to lift owt heavy as what ye are. I've seen her here at market—she's a strappin' woman. So that's no objection."

"Well, an' supposin' she did hide him i' t' hay-cham'er, or i' t' pig-sty, or wheer else, wheer is he now—wheer's t' body?"

"That's t' gre't point. Accordin' to what our Jack tells me, it's t' common opinion 'at that theer dead corpse were destroyed i' t' fire when Cherry-trees were burnt down bi them stang-riders. Destroyed, ye understand? In—that—theer—fire!"

For the first time since Perris's entrance there was a lull in the argument across the passage, and when the next contribution was made, it was by a new speaker whose voice was tinged with awe.

"It's a fearsome thing to think on, is that theer; a corpse bein' burnt up i' a fire and not able to stir hand or foot to do owt to help itsen. I've never

heerd o' owt o' that sort i' mi life. But wodn't nowt ha' been found—no bones, nor nowt o' that sort? "

" Nowt. T' fire 'ud ha' destroyed 'em all."

" What about t' buttons on t' man's clothes. Most men has brass buttons on their breeches. Wodn't them ha' survived t' perils o' t' fire? An' happen he might ha' hed money i' his pocket."

" Brass, gold, or silver, t' fire 'ud destroy all t' lot. I once had t' misfortune to drop a shillin' into t' fire, and t' wife raked t' ash-nook out next mornin' but ye could mak' nowt out. No—fire's a very powerful instrument, as ye might term it, and if t' body were hidden away i' t' hay-cham'er, or elsewhere, it 'ud soon be dissolved into what they call t' elements—which means nowt—when that fire came."

There was another spell of silence as a result of this speech, and in its midst Perris finished his supper, drank off his ale, and filled his pipe. As he began feeling in his pockets for a match, and realising that he had struck his last in the train, the conversation broke out again.

" Aye, well, who knows wheer t' man be? Did ye ever see him?—ye say ye've seen t' wife."

" I seen him more nor once. A tall, bony man, loose i' t' joints and shammocked in his walk. Allus carried an ashplant stick wi' him—I seen him slappin' his leg wi' it many a time up yonder i' t' market. A sandy-coloured feller, wi' a long nose—no beauty. Aw, aye, I seen him! "

Perris could not find a match in his pockets, nor in the room in which he sat, and the fire had died down to black ash. But there was a vase of paper-spills on the mantelpiece, and he took one out and, still smiling the queer smile, deliberately walked

across the passage into the room in which the men were talking, and coolly lighted his pipe at the fire round which they sat. Then, drawing steadily at it, and slapping his leg with his ashplant, he looked calmly round at their dilating eyes and parting lips and walked out of the house.

The company left behind let a full minute elapse before speech returned. Then with a mutual gasp of astonishment all spoke together.

"By Gow! what if yon wor t' man?"

"It mun ha' been t' man! I felt it when he walked in!"

"It wor his ghost. Lord ha' mercy—I'm fair ditherin' wi' fret!"

The man who had seen Perris spoke after the others.

"It wor t' man! He's grown a beard, but it wor him. Yon's Perris!"

Then, with a common consent, they made for the door and ran outside to the open space in front of the inn. But by that time the night was black and starless and the feeble gas-lamp made but a mockery of illumination. There was nothing to see, and nothing to hear, not even the sound of retreating footsteps.

For Perris was already round the corner of the little cluster of cottages, and striding quickly up the long hill that led to the centre of the town. He knew quite well where his destination lay, and now that he had supped and was smoking his pipe, he meant to go to it direct.

"Mestur Wroxdale's t' man for me," he muttered as he strode along. "A varry pleasant, reight-dealin' gentleman, is Mestur Wroxdale. He's t' man for my money."

The ancient market-place was in its usual half-lighted state when Perris turned into it. Now he

passed across the front of a lighted shop ; now he was lost in the shadow of some old building. He walked rapidly along, looking neither to right nor left, always sucking stolidly at his pipe and tapping his leg with his switch. And as he passed one shop, more brilliantly lighted than the rest, and its light fell full upon him, a man coming out of it saw him, glanced at him sharply, looked more searchingly, and turned to follow him.

In the shadow of the great church in the market-place Perris felt a tap on his elbow, and turning, found himself face to face with Justice, the gamekeeper from Martinsthorpe. Justice held out a hand. Perris stared at it, making no offer to take it.

" So you're not dead ? " said Justice.

" What's that to do wi' ye ? " asked Perris sullenly.

Justice smiled unpleasantly.

" It's had a good deal to do with a good many people lately, at any rate," said Justice. " Why, where have you been, man ? "

Perris stooped and thrust his lean face closer to the gamekeeper than the gamekeeper liked.

" Look here ! " he said. " Ye go your own ways, and I'll go mine. I want none o' your interference."

Justice stepped back a pace.

" I mean to see where you're going," he said.

" If ye want to know where I'm going," said Perris, slowly, " I'm going to pay a call on Mestur Wroxdale, t' lawyer, as lives i' that house, theer. If ye foller me, I'll gi' yer summat to carry away wi' yer—d' yer understand ? "

Justice made no answer. He moved away into the shadows, and from a convenient point watched Perris go up to the solicitor's house and ring the bell of the front door. A moment later he saw him

admitted. Then Justice went away, and hurried to the police, with whom he had recently been cultivating friendly relations. It seemed to him that a new and interesting stage of his connection with what he was now accustomed to call the Cherry-trees Mystery, was being developed in surprising fashion, and he meant to have his share in it.

Perris, having the solicitor's door open to him, lost no time in setting to business. He walked into the hall without invitation, and without ceremony addressed the maid who had answered his summons.

"I expect Mestur Wroxdale 'll be at home at this time?" he said, slapping his leg with his ashplant. "Ye might just tell him 'at I could like to have a word wi' him,—I've done business wi' him before now—name o' Perris—Abel Perris."

While the maid hesitated, knowing that her master made no business appointments after office hours, Wroxdale came into the further end of the hall and caught the end of Perris's request. Without showing surprise, he walked towards the door.

"Good evening, Mr. Perris," he said quickly. "Come this way."

Perris followed the solicitor down the hall to a room at the end which Wroxdale used as a study. He took off his hat as he entered, and stood waiting while Wroxdale turned up the reading-lamp which stood on his desk.

"Sit down," said Wroxdale, pointing to one of the easy-chairs which flanked the hearthrug. He took the opposite one himself, and gave his visitor a keen glance. "So you want to see me, Mr. Perris?" he added. "Business, eh?"

Perris laid his hat and stick on the floor at his side, and folded his big hands, thumbs up, across his knees.

"Why, ye see, Mestur Wroxdale," he began, "you did a bit o' business for me once or twice, and I thowt I'd liefer come to you nor to any other, sir. Ye're no doubt aware, Mestur Wroxdale, 'at I've been away fro' this neighbourhood for a piece?"

"Some time, I think," answered Wroxdale.

"Aye, some time," continued Perris. "Ye see sir, I had mi reasons for leavin' this part o' t' country. Aye, I went to London and started on a bit o' horse-dealin', and I were doin' nicely at it an' all. Howsomiver, this mornin' I were at t' Caledonian Market as they call it—it's a queerish place, but ye can now and then pick up a bargain o' sorts theer—and I chanced across yon there Mestur Mallins—Roger Mallins, him as farms out yonder at Woodbridge—and of course, we took a glass together, and he telled me some news o' t' owd neighbourhood, and 'specially this news about all t' recent goin's on at Cherry-trees. An', of course, it were all reight news to me, 'cause I'd niver heerd word on it afore."

"You'd heard—nothing?"

"Nowt, sir! I'm not one for readin' t' newspapers," replied Perris, "and ye see, I'd done—or wanted to ha' done wi' this part o' t' country an' t' owd life. Howsomiver, this feller Mallins, he telled me a deal, and I understand 'at they foun' t' body o' yon theer man, Webster—Pippany, as they called him—'at were once employed by me, and 'at now my wife's accused o' killin' the chap, and of getting rid o' me an' all. Is that reight, or is it wrong, Mestur Wroxdale?"

Wroxdale inclined his head.

"Right!" he answered.

Perris looked at the ceiling and sniffed.

"Well, sir," he said slowly, "it's a varry queer thing to me how folk gets mista'en notions into their heads. Howsomiver, as you say it is so, it is so, I

reckon. Then—my wife's i' danger, Mestur Wroxdale ? ”

“ Your wife is in serious danger,” replied Wroxdale. “ She is in such serious danger that she may be arrested at any moment.”

“ Aw ! ” said Perris. “ Aw ! Why, then, sir, it's as well I came back. I think, as she's charged wi' t' matter, we mun as well hev' it cleared up reight. 'Cause it were not my wife, Mestur Wroxdale, 'at made away wi' Webster. It were me ! ”

For a full moment Wroxdale made no answer. He had wondered, when Perris presented himself, if the man was intoxicated and had speedily decided that he was not ; now he wondered if Perris had lost his reason. He let Perris speak again before he himself spoke.

“ Not her at all,” said Perris. “ She's nowt to do wi' t' matter. It were me ! ”

Wroxdale picked up the poker and stirred the fire : the mere act of doing something physical was a relief to his nerves. He sat up again and regarded Perris steadily.

“ You say that you killed Pippany Webster ? ” he said.

“ Aye, I killed him ! ” answered Perris. “ I made away wi' t' chap reight enough.”

“ You know what you're saying ? ” asked Wroxdale. “ You're quite sure you know what you're saying ? ”

“ I know what I'm saying, sir, and I'm going to say it to t' police, if you'll tell me how to act about it,” replied Perris stoutly. “ We'll clear t' matter up.”

“ But—do you realise what it means to you ? ” asked Wroxdale earnestly. “ It may be—death.”

“ I know that an' all,” said Perris. “ An'—I don't care.”

Wroxdale rose from his chair and paced the room. He had never known an experience of this sort in the whole course of his career, and he was puzzled beyond measure.

"Was it—was it accidental?" he asked, suddenly stopping in front of Perris and staring down at him in wonder. "It was, eh?"

Perris shook his head.

"No, sir, it were nowt o' t' sort," he answered. "It were what I understand—I'm no gre't scholar—what I understand they term deliberate. I meant to kill t' feller, and I did kill him."

"But—why?" asked Wroxdale.

Perris's face suddenly became sullen, and he shook his head.

"I shalln't tell nobody why I killed t' man," he answered. "That's my business. But," he added, his face clearing again, "I'll tell you, and I'll tell t' police how and where it wor 'at I made away wi' him. It were one Sunda' night—I can't reightly fix t' exact date, but our Rhoda were singing a new piece that night down at t' chappil, and t' preacher had been to tea wi' us. When they'd gone, I wor alone, d'ye see, an' this Webster he come moochin' round like, and I led him into t' granary, and as I say, I hed mi reasons for makin' away wi' him, and I made away wi' him. An' later on, I put t' body away i' t' owd well."

Wroxdale sat down and stared at the man who had voluntarily made this extraordinary confession. Was he sane? He could see no sign of insanity in him; he talked coherently, intelligently—and yet, what sane man would boldly appear and give up his liberty, life, in this fashion?

"You want to make a confession to the police?" he asked suddenly.

"That's what I come to you about, sir," answered Perris. "I know naught about no confessions to t' police—I want to tell t' truth. If so be 'at my wife's i' danger—why, then, she mun be putten out o' danger, an'——"

Wroxdale gave way to a sharp feeling of humanity. He rose impulsively from his chair, and laid his hand on Perris's shoulder.

"Perris!" he exclaimed. "Tell me the truth! You're not making all this up, not inventing it, to shield your wife? Out with the truth, now?"

Perris looked up wonderingly, and the solicitor knew at once that he had listened to the naked truth.

"Eh, Lord bless you, no, sir!" he answered. "I telled you just how it all were. My wife knew naught about it. Nobody knew naught about it. It were nobody but me—nobody!"

Wroxdale took away his hand, and turned to his desk. But before he could sit down, the maid who admitted Perris knocked at the door and called him out.

"Wait a moment, Perris," he said, as he left the room.

Perris folded his hands and twiddled his thumbs.

"As many as is agreeable to you, sir," he answered.

Outside in the hall Wroxdale confronted Taffendale, the inspector, and, behind them, half-hidden in the shadows, a cloaked and hooded figure which he instinctively guessed to be Rhoda's. And with a quick recognition of the situation he raised his hand in the gesture of silence, and beckoned the two men aside out of earshot of the woman.

"Hush!" he said. "I've an idea why you've come. But—there'll be no proceedings against Mrs. Perris. Her husband is in that room, and he's just told me the truth. She's innocent of everything—

it was he who killed Webster ! But why, only himself and God know !—I doubt if men ever will."

XXIV

THROUGHOUT the dreary and sordid weeks which elapsed between the making of his confession to the police and the holding of the ensuing Winter Assizes Perris maintained the attitude which he had shown to Wroxdale with a firmness and stolidity that nothing could break down. Having once made the confession nothing moved him from it or whatever purpose it was that had impelled him to make it. How and when he killed Pippany Webster he would and did tell ; why he killed him he would not tell. It was nobody's affair but his, he said ; repeated attempts on Wroxdale's part to get him to tell more, warnings as to his fate, only produced sullenness on his part and eventually silence. Once committed for trial and placed in prison on remand he fell into the prison routine with ready acceptance and a curious equanimity. They said of him that nothing affected his appetite nor his ability to sleep ; he made no complaints and received Wroxdale's visits with indifference. And at last, when the Assizes were near at hand, he gave the solicitor a plain intimation that he wanted to see him no more.

" I can't see what's t' use o' your comin' here so oft, Mestur Wroxdale," he said, showing for the first time some signs of testiness. " It's only wastin' your time and it's doin' no good. I've telled t' truth about t' matter and theer's an end on it. At least, I know what t' end 'll be, and t' sooner it comes t' better."

" So you mean to let yourself be hanged without

an effort to save your neck ? ” said Wroxdale, feeling it necessary to speak with brutal plainness. “ Remember, you’re not playing at this—you’re in the hands of the Law.”

“ T’ Law and t’ lawyers can do wi’ me what they like,” answered Perris. “ I’ve spokken. I’ve telled t’ truth, and I’ll tak’ t’ consequences. I thowt it all out when I were travillin’ down i’ t’ train that day I come to see you, sir. I tell you I’ve spokken. An’ nowt ’ll alter what I’ve said.”

Wroxdale shook his head.

“ You’ve still a duty to yourself, Perris,” he said. “ You see, if you could only show me that there were extenuating circumstances——”

“ I don’t know what them words means, sir,” replied Perris, with more signs of testiness. “ I’ve telled what t’ circumstances were, an’——”

“ Wait a moment,” said Wroxdale, “ and try to remember that I’m doing my best for you. I don’t want to see you go to the scaffold if I can save you. By extenuating circumstances I mean that perhaps you lost your temper——”

Perris made a gesture of impatient dissent.

“ I lost nowt o’ t’ sort, then ! ” he exclaimed. “ I wernn’t likely to lose mi temper wi’ t’ like o’ that theer. I killed him same as I’d ha’ killed a weasel or a rat-ten. An’ I’ve telled ye once for all, Mestur Wroxdale, I’ve said my say and I shall say no more. Ye mean well, sir, but it’s no use comin’ to this place agen on that business. What I’ve said, I’ll stand to.”

Then Wroxdale played his last card.

“ There’s somebody besides yourself to think of, Perris,” he said. “ There’s your wife. You don’t want her to go through the rest of her life branded as a murderer’s widow ? ”

The look of sullen obstinacy which Wroxdale had

begun to know so well came over Perris's face, and settled there as if it would never move.

"I've said my say, Mestur Wroxdale," he answered. "I've nowt no more to remark, sir."

And Wroxdale left him and troubled him no more. But he contrived, with the co-operation of the authorities, to have Perris examined, unknown to himself, by mental specialists, for he had doubts as to the man's sanity. And the mental specialists gave it as their convinced opinion that Perris was sane enough on all points, and then Wroxdale knew that things would have to take their course.

That course was short and sharp enough, once the weeks of weary waiting were over. In a crowded court, in which he himself seemed to be the most unconcerned person present, Perris, called upon to plead, reiterated his guilt as calmly and firmly as he had confessed it before the magistrates. Advised by the presiding judge to withdraw his plea and to take his trial, he answered that he should do no such thing.

He had already told the police and the magistrates all the circumstances of the crime he was charged with and in the telling he had spoken the truth. He was not going to take back what he had said to please anybody. And just as he had been deaf to all that Wroxdale had urged, so he was deaf to all that grave judicial advice could put before him. Forms of law were naught to him, and he shook his head impatiently at the mention of them and the advantage to himself and the public of a fair trial.

"I've answered that theer question you axed me," he said. "An' I'll answer it agen—Guilty!"

So there was no more to be done or said, the prisoner having been proved to be a perfectly sane man, and presently Perris heard himself sentenced to death. He stood for a moment after the last words had fallen on

his ears, and he looked round the court, in which were many faces that he must have known, but if he was searching for any particular face he showed no sign. And with every eye fixed on him, he presently turned, and walked steadily down the stairs behind him, and so disappeared.

There were many in the court who believed that Perris's last look round had been for his wife. But Rhoda had not been in court, though she was close at hand. At the time of Perris's sudden reappearance she had broken down, and it had been necessary to remove her from Wroxdale's house to an adjacent nursing home where she had ever since remained. Only the best medical skill and the closest attention had restored her sufficiently to be in a condition to face the prospect of entering the witness-box, and the doctor who had accompanied her to the Assizes was thankful for his patient's sake when he heard that there would be no call upon her.

"All the same," he said to Wroxdale, who with Taffendale had come across from the courts to the hotel in which Rhoda and a nurse were waiting in a private room, "somebody's got to break the news to her. She'll be better when she hears it."

Wroxdale looked at Taffendale.

"That's your duty, Mark," he said quietly.

Taffendale's face showed signs of agitation, and he turned away from the other two. But they suddenly saw him draw himself up and square his shoulders and he turned to them with a firmly-set jaw.

"If you think so, and the doctor thinks so," he said.

The doctor nodded.

"Yes, I think so," he said. "Tell her quietly and briefly. I'll call the nurse out and we'll stay near the door in case we're wanted. Come away as soon as

you've told her, and then we'll get her away again. Come at once—the sooner she knows the better."

When Taffendale walked through the door which the doctor held open for him he felt that he was dealing with the most critical episode in his life. He knew what would result from the carrying out of the sentence which had just been passed on Abel Perris. Rhoda would be free, and she was already cleared of the suspicions which had gathered about her. And yet he felt a strange certainty that at this moment she was further away from him than ever; that there was a vast gulf between them which nothing could bridge. And as he crossed the room all thoughts of himself and of her went out of his mind and he only saw her as a trembling and agitated woman waiting to know the worst.

She sat in an easy-chair in which the nurse had placed her, facing the fire, and she was staring at the flames with abstracted eyes when Taffendale went up and touched her shoulder. She looked up at him with a start and her hands clasped themselves nervously.

"You won't be wanted, Rhoda," he said gently.

For a moment she searched his face with a long look.

"Then—it's over?" she whispered.

"It's over."

"He—he wouldn't say—more?"

"Nothing more."

"And so——"

Her voice sank to a whisper and her eyes finished the question. And Taffendale inclined his head and turned away without speaking. But he quickly turned to her again and laid his hand on her arm.

"There's hope yet," he said. "Wroxdale says there'll be a petition, and all that. Now, Rhoda,

you must go back with the nurse and the doctor. Be brave."

She rose obediently and stood for a while looking through the window at the gloomy façade of the great hall which Taffendale had just left. Then she turned to him.

"If—if naught's any good," she said quietly, "will they let me speak to him before—the end? There's things—I want to say. You'll see to that, Mark?"

"I'll see to that," replied Taffendale. "Now, Rhoda, you must go."

He picked up her cloak from the table close by and put it round her shoulders, remembering as he did so how, not so many months before, he had rendered her the same service when she had come to his house at the Limepits, little dreaming of what lay before herself and him. And with this thought in his mind, and without another word, he called in the nurse and the doctor and left her with them.

Taffendale and Wroxdale travelled from the Assize town in company, and for a time neither spoke of the event of the morning. But at last Taffendale started out of a long reverie, which his companion had taken care not to break in upon.

"What chance will this petition have?" he asked abruptly.

Wroxdale looked out of the window of the compartment which they had secured to themselves, and stared at the grey landscape for some time before he answered.

"Well, Mark," he said at last, "if you want to know the truth, I'm afraid very little. Remember the summing-up or, rather, the judge's remarks. There's no denying the fact—this, on Perris's own deliberate confession, was a particularly cold-blooded and brutal murder. You know that there doesn't seem to be a

single extenuating circumstance. He deliberately killed that poor fellow. Now, his Lordship of this morning is well known as a very stern and severe judge—he's a thoroughly upright man, but a staunch upholder of the Law, and if we send up a petition the Home Secretary will depend upon what he, who heard the case, has to say, and I fail to see what he can say in Perris's favour—with the exception of one thing."

"What's that?" asked Taffendale sharply.

"Why, that when he heard of all this he returned at once—at once, mind!—and gave himself up to justice," replied Wroxdale. "A certain percentage of criminals do that, but it's a small one. Another thing though really part of the same thing—is that all through, from the time he made his voluntary confession to the police to the time of the trial this morning, he showed a firm desire to tell the truth, regardless of the consequences to himself. That is all, so far as I can see, that would be likely to weigh with the authorities. And yet, there is another feature of the case which might be taken into consideration."

"Well?" asked Taffendale.

"This," said Wroxdale thoughtfully. "The absence of any known motive. Perris is such an obstinate, pig-headed fellow that it has been, and, in my opinion, always will be impossible to get out of him what his motive was. But one may reasonably suppose that he didn't kill that man with premeditation. I'll stake my life he didn't, Mark! Therefore, the presumption is that he did kill him on the spur of the moment, whatever Perris himself may say. Perris has stuck consistently all through to the same tale: 'I meant to kill Webster, and I did kill him.' Yes quite so!—but how long had he meant to kill him? A month, a week, a day, or five minutes. My own belief is that when Pippany Webster entered those premises at

Cherry-trees, Perris had no more idea of killing him than I have of killing you."

Taffendale, who had been listening with close attention, nodded.

"Couldn't all that be put in a petition?" he asked.

"Certainly it could, and we'll have a petition, and it shall be put in," replied Wroxdale. "I'll draft that petition at once, and we'll do all we can with it, and we'll make a great point, too, of the mystery that overhangs the case yet. Yes, we'll have a petition, and run it for all it's worth."

"And whatever it costs I'll stand to," said Taffendale. "Never mind what the amount is."

Wroxdale made no answer to that beyond a nod. He drew out and lighted a cigar, and smoked for awhile in silence. Then he turned to his companion with an enigmatic smile.

"Human nature is a queer thing, Mark Taffendale," he said. "There's no particular personal reason why any one should sign that petition in favour of Abel Perris. He's not a very lovable personality, poor fellow; the folk above him will say that he's best out of the way, and the folk below him will remember that he killed one of themselves. But I can see one reason why Martinsthorpe folk would sign it—sign it, to a man no doubt."

Taffendale knitted his brows and looked suspiciously at the solicitor.

"What are you driving at?" he asked. "Some of your quibbles, no doubt."

"No quibbles, Mark, plain facts," answered Wroxdale. "They'll sign it to spite you and Mrs. Perris. Village folk never forget. They know that if Perris is hanged, his wife will be free—and the probability, nay the certainty, is, that if they know there's a chance

of saving his life, they'll hurry to sign their names or make their marks. Do you follow that, Mark?"

"Let them sign for whatever reason they please," replied Taffendale quietly. "I'm only speaking the truth when I say that I want to see Perris's life saved. And I don't care what folk may say about me, they've said so much already that they can't say much more, nor hurt me much more."

What folk were saying Taffendale knew that very night. As he rode his horse out of Wroxdale's yard on his way home, one of a mob, that had somehow heard of his presence at the solicitor's and had gathered in the darkness to see him go, flung out a loud-voiced gibe—

"Well, ye'll be able to marry t' widder when t' man's hanged, Mr. Taffendale, so all 'll end well for all on yer!"

Then came another and more strident voice—

"Aye, but Perris isn't hanged yet!"

Wroxdale heard those cries, and knew that he had been right in what he had said to Taffendale in the train. And he had further proof of the correctness of his conclusions when copies of the petition in favour of Perris were circulated around the country side. For the signatures came fast and thick, and Wroxdale was soon aware that amongst the people there was a fierce desire to prevent the capital sentence from being carried into effect. And from the immediate neighbourhood the movement in favour of Perris's reprieve spread over the county, and to places further afield, and Wroxdale recognised that one of those unaccountable national impulses had set in which begin in an obscure corner and quickly cover a kingdom.

"It will be one of the most numerously-signed petitions ever known," he said to Taffendale, when

a fortnight had gone by and the time was drawing short, "and we could get thousands of signatures yet. But it must go up to-morrow. We've done all that can be done, now."

Perris, in his condemned cell, knew nothing of what was being done for him. Wroxdale, knowing his frame of mind on the matter, had thought it best to tell him nothing. For Perris appeared to be fully content and in a certain way happy. They said that he talked and read; he ate well and slept well, and was deeply and almost humbly grateful because he was allowed to smoke his pipe. And he expressed no desire to see anybody.

But when it came to the last day but one of his life, Perris, early in the morning, sent for Wroxdale, and the solicitor, when he arrived, saw something in the man's eyes which he had never seen there before.

"Mestur Wroxdale," he said, "ye know what's to happen day after to-morrow. Now, sir, to-morrow I want to see—my wife. An' I want to see—Mestur Taffendale. An' I want to see 'em together. Can it be done? I want it to be done—it mun be done if it can. I've—summat to say to t' two on 'em—together."

And Wroxdale promised that it should be done, and asked no questions, but hurried away to make arrangements, and as he left the cell he said to himself—

"At last he is going to tell the truth!"

XXV

To the man and woman to whom Abel Perris wished to speak his last words, the preliminaries of their visit to him seemed like the stages of some hideous dream

from which, struggle as he may, a dreamer has no power to awake. In after years neither had any clear conceptions of the events of that day. It was a jumble of confused recollections. There was the journey to the town in which Perris lay in prison ; there was the sight of the prison itself ; of its towers, from one of which the black flag would be displayed next morning about the time that the townsfolk would settle to their business for the day ; there were locks, and bolts, and bars, and formalities, and rooms and places which were strangely unlike all other rooms and places ; there were men with keys, and dismal corridors to be traversed ; there was a curious odour, which they were never again to forget ; there was a feeling that the busy life of the town through which they had just passed was so far off that Heaven or Hell seemed nearer. And there was the awful realisation of the fact that it was the eve of the day on which Perris was to die, and that no news had come of a reprieve, and that Wroxdale's hopes had fallen to the lowest degree, and that they were going to hear words from a living man, who in a few short hours would be dead and buried. And then there was the further and more horrible realisation that the man himself was there before them ; caged, like some wild animal, behind bars before which his keepers sat ; they caged too, as if they also were wild animals that must be kept from the other. There was to be no touching of hands, then, nothing but an exchange of sight and sound ?—why, truly, then, this was to show indeed that between the man who was to die and the folk who were to live there was a gulf fixed which nothing could bridge.

The man and woman who were to live, who were presently to walk out of that awful place free to breathe the air, to see the sun, to hold converse with

their fellow-creatures, stared at the man who was going into the darkness as if he were something that they had never seen before and could not comprehend. There was no word in them ; they could only look and marvel with a terrible fear. But the man beyond the bars spoke, and there was little of fear or trouble in his voice.

“ Well, Rhoda, my lass, I tek’ it kind of you that yer should come here, and you too, Mestur Taffendale,” said Perris. “ It seems a queer place to meet in, but theer’s a deal o’ queer things i’ this world, and I expect we mun put up wi’ ’em. Theer were summut I wanted to say to both on you before—well, before to-morrow—so I had to ask Mestur Wroxdale to get yer to come. Ye see, both on yer, I’ve thought and studied matters a deal since I were in this place, havin’ naught else to do, and I come to t’ conclusion ’at I owt not to—to go away, as it weer, wi’out tellin’ yer summat ’at I think I owt to tell. I wouldn’t tell nowt to Mestur Wroxdale, nor to t’ judge, nor to t’ clergyman, but I’ll tell you two—I’ve a sort of feelin’, a conviction like, ’at I mun tell yer ! Ye see, I want yer to know why all that theer occurred, an’——”

Rhoda cried out and tried to speak, and could not, and Taffendale suddenly heard his own voice as if it had been somebody else’s and wondered at the horror in it.

“ Don’t tell us anything, Perris, that’ll hurt you ! Never mind anything, Perris, but——”

“ It’ll none hurt me, Mestur Taffendale ! T’ hurt ’ud be if I didn’t tell now I feel I owt to tell you two. I understand ’at what I say to you two here is for yourselves—theer’s no lawyers here. Ye see, Rhoda, and you, Mestur Taffendale, I wanted to tell you why I made away with yon Pippany Webster. An’ I’ll tell you t’ truth, as I’ve told it all along i’ this matter.

Listen well to what I say, and happen you'll understand."

The men sitting between the double sets of bars became conscious of two white, strained faces pressed close to one set staring at the other face, not so white, which confronted them from across the narrow space.

"Ye see, it were that Sunda' night, Rhoda, my lass, 'at ye were singing that grand solo piece down at t' chappil, and ye and t' preacher hed setten off, and ye'd left me at home, all by misen. An' then come yon Pippany Webster, sneaken' round t' place, and I see'd his head poppin' up first i' one place and then in another, and at last I went out and tackled him, and axed him his business on my premises. And then he tell'd me—and ye'll both excuse me for mentionin' t' matter—'at he'd been a deal o' late in that theer Badger's Hollow, and he'd seen you two keepin' company. An' then he went on to tell me 'at one night when I were away he'd spied on t' Cherry-trees, and he'd seen you, Mestur Taffendale, come theer late and stop a long time wi' Rhoda theer. An' all t' time he were talkin' and tellin' his spy tales I were thinkin' o' two things at once, in a manner o' speakin'. One were this—'at I'd been a fool, and 'at I niver owt to hev expected 'at a young woman like you, Rhoda, my lass, could ha' cared owt for a poor sort of a chap like me, an'——"

Again Rhoda cried out inarticulately, and Taffendale standing at her side, could feel her shaking in agony. But Perris went quietly on.

"—an' I owt to hev had t' sense to see 'at sooner or later she'd meet some man 'at were more suited, like. An' t' other thowt were this—how many folks 'i' t' village knew what that theer rascal, Pippany Webster, knew? So I set to work to pump all t' knowledge 'at I could out on him, and I very soon convinced

misen 'at nobody but him did know, and 'at he hadn't telled a soul, not even that theer owd Tibby Graddige. An' so then I thinks to misen, 'I'll soon keep thy tongue quiet, mi lad!' and I 'ticed him up into t' granary, and theer I choked him."

Taffendale, gripping the bars at which he stood, bent his head on his hands and groaned. He understood now, and he saw the uselessness, the utter purposelessness of what this poor, dull intellect before him had meant to be so purposeful, so useful.

"Oh, Perris!" he cried. "Why did you do it for that! I'd rather the whole world had known than it should have brought you to this!"

In the dull light Perris smiled.

"Aye, but ye see, I thowt different, Mestur Taffendale," he said. "I were none goin' t' hev' a chap like that theer carryin' his tales round t' countryside, as he would ha' done. I knew he wouldn't keep his tongue quiet. So, as I tell yer, I quietened him. An' then I made away wi' him down t' owd well—but theer's no need to go into that theer. Rhoda, my lass, theer's no call to cry."

"Let her cry," said Taffendale; "it's the best thing for her. Oh, Perris, you made a great mistake!"

"Aye, but I tell yer 'at I considered different!" said Perris. "Happen I think in a way o' mi' own, Mestur Taffendale. Howsomiver, I want to tell ye both why I went off. Ye see, I studied a deal after I'd made away wi' Webster—I were allus thinkin' about t' matter. An' I thowt to misen—well, I'm nowt and nobody, nowt but a poor uneddicated chap 'at 'll niver mek' owt on't, and if so be as Rhoda and Mestur Taffendale's fallen i' love—ye'll excuse me for mentionin' such things—why, t' sooner I'm out o' t' way the better for all parties; it doesn't matter what comes to me, and they'll be free to please

theirsens. Ye see, theer were a chap 'at I used to know—a chap 'at reads books—as told me many a year ago 'at if a man run away fro' his wife she could very soon wed agen, and so I considered to be off. But mind yer, I were not goin' wi'out money, and so I solded what I could, and got t' brass i' hand and away I went. I niver meant a soul to hear tell o' me agen: I were goin' to Canada, but I came bi chance to do a bit o' horse-tradin' i' London. Howsomiver, ye know how things has turned out. It never struck me 'at yon theer owd well 'ud iver be opened agen; I thowt 'at wi' Webster quietened and me gone ye'd hev plain sailin'. But I niver were nowt but a fool."

Taffendale felt that words were useless. He looked in dumb misery at the floor of the open space which lay between him and Perris, and thought that the stones were more likely to speak than he was. And above the sound of Rhoda's quiet weeping Perris spoke again.

"Howsomiver—to-morrow 'll settle all. An' then ye'll be free enough. Ye'll be good to her, Mestur Taffendale. An', Rhoda, my lass——"

But Rhoda's weeping suddenly ceased, and she stopped Perris with a fierce gesture that made Taffendale start.

"Don't!" she said in a tense voice. "I can't bear it! Mark—tell him—he's a dying man—tell him that, however foolish we may have been, there never was aught wrong between you and me—if he dies thinking that there was I shall——"

Perris lifted his hand quietly.

"I niver thowt theer were owt wrong, my lass," he said, with a simple dignity. "That were why I killed t' man 'at were sayin' theer were, before he could go an' say it to others. But I knew ye loved each other, and so——"

And the scene came to an end, for Rhoda fell in a heap at the foot of the bars, and while Taffendale helped to carry her away in one direction, Perris was taken off by his custodians in another.

There were women in the prison who took charge of Rhoda, and when Taffendale had seen her into their care he went, half-fainting himself, to the room where he had left Wroxdale. There were others there, officials, and when he entered they were talking with Wroxdale, and Wroxdale turned hastily from them to him.

"Taffendale—it's come!" he exclaimed.

Taffendale stared at him vacantly.

"What's come?" he asked dully.

"What? The reprieve, man! They're just going to tell him. It came——"

But Taffendale, for the first time in his life, had fainted, and the warder who had brought him to the room caught him as he reeled and fell. And only Wroxdale of all the men around knew that the message which saved Perris's life had also saved Taffendale from a long future of ceaseless torture and a hell of remorse.

"It's true?" he said, when he came round and found Wroxdale at his side. "He's—not to die?"

"It's true, Mark. He's not to die. And he's a young man, remember. He'll be a free man yet," replied Wroxdale.

Taffendale rose unsteadily to his feet.

"Let me get into the air," he said. "And—leave me alone a minute or two, Wroxdale."

There was a dismal little garden outside the room, and on a bench which stood against a blank wall Taffendale sat down and stared at the patch of grey

sky, which was all that he could see of the outer world. His mind was growing calmer and clearer and he began to see the future. For him and Rhoda, as human minds linked together, there was no future ; he knew, had known ever since the hour in which he found her on the edge of the quarry, that whatever might chance, Perris, dead or alive, would always stand between them. And now Perris was alive and was to live, and was to atone for his sin, and hers would be to wait until the years of that atonement were over, and then to give him what cheer she could in the days that would yet be left. And his own—his, Taffendale's ?

"She shall never want for aught until he's free," he said to himself. "And when he's free they shall have a new life. But from to-day she and I shall never meet again."

Then he went within, and found Wroxdale, and gave him instructions as to Rhoda's care, and himself went away. And as the wicket-gate closed upon him with a harsh clang, he lifted his head and drew a deep and long breath. He knew that he had passed out of a worse prison, a harder captivity, than any Abel Perris would ever know.

THE END

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